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THE SYMPHONIES OF WILLIAM ALWYN : A CRITICAL AND ANALYTICAL STUDY

T W Barrowcliffe

ABSTRACT

Despite being born into a relatively unmusical family. William Alwyn (1905-1985), displayed musical talent from an early age, and obtained a scholarship to the Royal Academy of Music at the age of fifteen. He started composing when he was very young and continued almost until his death, leaving a prodigious output, including scores for over 200 films. In his forties he pronounced himself dissatisfied with his earlier compositions, and set out to write more “serious” music, and in particular, a series of symphonies.

Alwyn wrote five symphonies in all; the first four, written over a 10-year period in the late 1940s and 50s, form an inter-related sequence, though in form each is very different to the others. The fifth symphony, written when he was in his seventies, has an artistic inspiration and is a much shorter work with little in common with the previous four.

Although Alwyn’s symphonies are firmly rooted in the tonal idiom, he developed his own very individual approach to tonality, thematic development, and symphonic structure. This thesis presents a detailed critical analysis of each of the symphonies, and briefly describes their place in the context of other British symphonies, and in the prevailing musical trends of the time.

THE SYMPHONIES OF WILLIAM ALWYN: A CRITICAL AND ANALYTICAL STUDY

**A Thesis submitted for the degree of MA in
Music, University of Durham**

**Trevor William Barrowcliffe
MA (Oxon) PhD (London)**

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Finally I would like to dedicate this thesis to the memory of William Alwyn, an under-rated composer whose music has given me, and continues to give, enormous pleasure.

PREFACE

If asked to name major British symphonic composers of the first half of the twentieth century, the most likely response would be Elgar, Vaughan Williams, and perhaps Arnold Bax. Other important landmarks come to mind with Harty's 'Irish' Symphony, Bliss's *Colour Symphony* (1921-2), Walton's First Symphony, which made such an impression at its first (incomplete) hearing in 1934, and Moeran's Symphony in G minor (1937). These symphonic essays remind us that the symphony as a genre was by no means in decline, and there were numerous other aspiring names ready to try their hands at a style of composition which was still considered the mark of intellectual apogee. Among these more neglected names, William Alwyn is particularly interesting; he came from a non-musical family in Northampton but showed a talent for music at an early age. He obtained a studentship at the RAM when he was only 15 and in his youth was a prolific composer. By his mid-thirties his works included 14 string quartets, a piano concerto, and a great deal of film music. However, by his late thirties he became disillusioned with his earlier efforts for the screen and decided to concentrate on the more cerebral challenge of writing symphonic works, though writing for films by no means ceased. Alwyn's First Symphony was published in 1949, and three more followed in the subsequent decade, with a fifth added much later. Rooted as they are firmly in a tonal idiom, Alwyn developed an entirely individual approach to tonality and symphonic structure, and whilst other composers' influences are recognisable, his distinctive musical personality shines through in all his symphonic essays.

In this thesis it is proposed to carry out an in-depth study of Alwyn's symphonies, with emphasis on the following aspects:

- 1) A detailed analysis of the works themselves, in particular their harmonic and thematic structures, any specific Alwyn characteristics, and influences of other composers;

- 2) A comparison, where necessary, of the symphonies with Alwyn's other music;
- 3) The relationship with prevailing musical trends in the 1940s and 50s;
- 4) A comparison with other British music of the period, especially symphonic music.

An Introduction to the Symphonies

As a young man Alwyn was a prolific composer, and by the time he was 30 had composed no less than 14 string quartets, a piano concerto, and a huge work - a setting of Blake's *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* - for large orchestra, organ, double chorus, and soloists. He had also composed many film scores, and continued to be in demand for this type of musical accompaniment until towards the end of his composing life. However, in his mid-thirties he pronounced himself dissatisfied with most of his compositions, and determined to put his composing career onto a more serious footing. Thus it was that, in his early forties, he eventually wrote his First Symphony, completed in 1949. Alwyn's delay in approaching the symphony put him in good company with Brahms, though for different reasons – the latter felt overshadowed by Beethoven and by Beethoven's Ninth in particular. In Alwyn's case he felt that he needed to study in depth the scores of those symphonic composers he admired before he felt ready to tackle symphonic form, though it is interesting to note that the list of composers that Alwyn cited as being most influential, i.e. Liszt, Wagner, Debussy, Puccini, Stravinsky, Scriabin and Elgar¹, ironically contains only one truly recognised symphonist. Having decided to write a symphony, Alwyn conceived a 'grand plan', to write a series of four symphonies - the first being a sort of exposition and the last being the Finale - mimicking in a large-scale, cyclic fashion the shape of a four-movement work. As time went on, this idea was gradually, and perhaps wisely abandoned². In fact, Alwyn wrote five symphonies altogether, although the first four, written within a decade, do undoubtedly

¹ William Alwyn. Sleeve notes, recording of 1st symphony, Lyrita, 1975.

² Adrian Wright. *The Innumerable Dance*, Boydell Press 2008, p171.

form some kind of coherent sequence, whereas the Fifth, an entirely different structural conception, was written some fifteen years after the Fourth, when Alwyn's career, and his life, had undergone a profound change.

One thing Alwyn cannot be accused of is monotony of form – in terms of overall structure no two of the symphonies are alike. Following the 'classical' four-movement structure of the First, the Second presents a rare instance of a one-movement structure, consciously divided into two parts (the author considers this a two-movement symphony – see Chapter 3); the Third and Fourth, by contrast, are three-movement works, though with very different internal structures, while the Fifth, uniquely, is a genuine one-movement symphony.

Within the movements, it may also be added, Alwyn uses a fertile variety of forms, and though he claimed to eschew classical sonata form, he nevertheless drew on the form's dialectical properties when inventing forms of his own. There is perhaps some irony in the fact that Alwyn claimed to have found new structural potential while studying the scores of Liszt's orchestral music, including the *Faust* Symphony. There he realised that symphonic music could be composed using alternative forms to those used in classical symphonies³, even though, in truth, Liszt's formal procedures in many of his symphonic poems rarely stray from traditional sonata principles (including *Faust*). More likely, what Alwyn discovered in Liszt was the considerable potential for thematic transformation, a technique he used at length in much of his symphonic writing. It is in the inner movements of the First, Third and Fourth Symphonies where Alwyn is arguably at his most conventional. The two 'classical' Scherzo-and-Trio movements, in symphonies 1 and 4 are obvious examples (though the Trio section in the First Symphony is more unconventionally divided into three subsections), and in each movement the reprise of the Scherzo section is, more analogous to sonata behaviour, modified and extended. The slow movements of the

³ William Alwyn. Elgar as a conductor. In: *Composing in Words*, William Alwyn, ed Andrew Palmer, Toccata Press, 2009, pp309-10.

First and Third are also in conventional ternary (ABA) form, with lyrical outer sections enclosing a more turbulent middle core. However, the structures of the outer movements of Nos.1,3 & 4, and the whole of No.2, while certainly not devoid of form, more readily resist traditional labelling and do not fall into any particular cast or category, having more to do with the harmonic and emotional journeys which Alwyn sets out to describe. In this respect he is perhaps following Sibelius, whose symphonic movements often evince a 'self-generating' form (eg 2nd Symphony, 1st movement, 5th symphony, last movement).

Alwyn avoided conventional development of themes, and the structural freedom which he sought in his symphonies led to a preference for short motifs – “germinal seeds” as he called them (1), rather than extensive melodic lines, although the third movements of Nos.1 and 4 showed that he was perfectly capable of composing more extended lyrical themes. With regard to Alwyn's notion of 'germinal seeds', there are obvious precedents in Elgar, particularly in the generative use of the motto theme in the 1st symphony; however Alwyn's processes are different in the way the motifs are handled and transformed. Another British symphonist with a preference for the use of short motifs was Havergal Brian, though in most other respects there is little resemblance between the symphonic methods of these two composers.

These motifs appear in different guises within the movements, and quite often recur in other movements, and even in subsequent symphonies (eg. the last movement of the Fourth contains motifs derived from that of the First). Although Alwyn claimed (perhaps a little too auspiciously) that he was treading new symphonic paths, this 'transformation of themes' approach reflected a continuing interest in cyclic practices prevalent in both European and British symphonic music. Nonetheless, Alwyn developed his own version of this technique and was particularly adept at introducing important thematic material in an understated, almost surreptitious, way, ideas which later change their character radically. This often occurs with one of Alwyn's characteristic types of motif: the use of wide-ranging themes for brass,

particularly horns. Examples occur in the first and fourth movements of the First Symphony and in the first movement of the Second. Another characteristic thematic motif is the almost obsessive use of repeated notes, often implying a military rhythm; this is first encountered in the first and fourth movements of the First Symphony, and is used extensively (perhaps to the point of *ad nauseam*) in the first and last movements of the Third.

Despite all the harmonic developments of the twentieth century, Alwyn's symphonies remain firmly rooted in a tonal idiom in which the binary contrasts of diatonicism and chromaticism have a part to play. This is even true of the Third Symphony which makes a bid to experiment with all twelve semitones, perhaps, like Britten, as a gesture towards dodecaphony. However, Alwyn's harmonic progressions are far from stereotypical or straightforward. By way of his tutelage under Mackenzie and McEwen, he learned his lessons in nineteenth-century musical syntax thoroughly. This is evident in his studious avoidance of conventional cadences, perhaps following Elgar's example. Even when he arrives in a key, the new tonal plane often feels unsettled by the use of added, extraneous notes, and even sometimes by bi-tonality behaviour (e. g. the passage in the first movement of the Third Symphony, letters B and X).

In most of the symphonies there is extensive fluid harmonic movement, both within individual movements and in the larger canvas of the symphony as a whole, where the tonic is more often reserved for the beginning and the very end, and in the Third Symphony, the phenomenon of beginning in one key and clearly ending in another is reminiscent of the "progressive tonality", practised extensively by Nielsen, and to a lesser extent by Sibelius. In fact, each symphony essays a different form of tonal process. In the First, for example, there is clear journey from D minor in the opening of the first movement to D major in the final peroration of the fourth movement; in the Second, there is a struggle between the 'sharp' keys (of the opening) and the 'flat' keys, with E flat major as the final destination; this struggle is continued in the Third, and to a certain extent in the Fourth, where the journey is from F# minor to B flat major. This sense of conflict, together with the fact that the

final cadences are invariably delayed until a few bars before the end of a movement, mean that the massive climaxes of which Alwyn is so fond (perhaps redolent of his film music), always feel satisfactorily hard-won and not self-indulgent.

It is fundamentally an exploration of these tonal, harmonic, thematic and structural elements that naturally helped to shape this thesis, and it seemed entirely logical that, given the individual properties of each symphony, and the much larger concept with which Alwyn began his symphonic odyssey (albeit one he later jettisoned), a chapter should be devoted to the interrogation and discussion of each major symphonic essay with, perhaps, a sense of culmination in the Fourth Symphony, arguably Alwyn's finest exploration of the genre.

CHAPTER 1

William Alwyn, the Man and his Music

The source material for most of this Chapter has been taken from Adrian Wright's comprehensive biography of Alwyn – '*The Innumerable Dance*'⁴; any other sources are referenced separately.

Childhood and Early Musical Life

William Alwyn was born William Alwyn Smith in 1905, third of 5 children to parents William James Smith and Ada (née Tomkins); he had two brothers and two sisters. Alwyn's father was originally brought up in London, but when the family's fortunes declined they moved to Northampton, where he met his wife. Ada's family had had a grocery business in the town for some time, but because of various family problems it had not prospered. After his marriage William James threw himself into the grocery business, which together with Ada's help soon became much more successful – with the expansion of the business they moved to new larger premises, which were named rather grandiosely by William 'Shakspere Stores – The People's Provider'. The name reflected William's lifelong love of literature, and Shakespeare in particular.

This might seem an unpromising background for an aspiring musician, but in general Alwyn had a happy childhood. His father used to take him out into the countryside and would often recite poetry and other literature on these rambles, presumably helping to imbue Alwyn with a love of poetry and nature. He was closer to his father than his mother, with whom he had a rather cool relationship, but it was his mother who first recognised his musical talent and did something about it.

⁴ Adrian Wright. *The Innumerable Dance*, Boydell Press 2008.

An event which had a significant impact on family life was the death in 1913 of Tony, Alwyn's elder brother. As well as being a severe blow to the family, this meant that Alwyn now became next in line to inherit the grocery business. However Alwyn's interest in music had started at a very young age, and as he grew up it became increasingly clear that he was to have a musical career of some kind. Although Alwyn claims to have been born into an unmusical family this was not entirely the case. His father, though not sharing his interest in music, took him to regular weekend military band concerts in the local park, and there were also visits to music hall concerts at local theatres, and to see visiting Companies at the Northampton Opera House.

In fact there was musical talent in the family; his uncle Ernest and Aunty May had a successful music hall act, which Alwyn must have seen on his visits to music halls in Northampton, and his mother's grandfather was a competent flautist. Ada herself played the piano, though rather infrequently, as family entertainment, and Alwyn, rather unkindly, thought her 'musical without knowing anything about music'. Ada arranged for him to have music lessons at the age of 6 with Mr Law, an ex-army bandsman, and although Alwyn was keen to learn the flute, his teacher thought his hands too small, so his first instrument was a six-keyed wooden piccolo. He also showed some interest in the piano, though the instrument at home was in rather poor condition.

At the age of 9 Alwyn had a sort of nervous breakdown, brought on by severe migraine – this was to be a recurring affliction during his life. However this episode turned out to be a blessing in disguise, as his mother sent him to stay with friends to recuperate, and during his stay the lady of the house taught him to play the piano. He continued piano lessons when he returned home and broadened his musical knowledge, obtaining music from a shop run by the uncle of Edmund Rubbra – Rubbra was 3 years older than Alwyn but they knew each other and for a time were boyhood friends.

Alwyn started to compose from an early age; his first composition was for solo piccolo at the age of 8, and in the following years he wrote several

pieces for piano. Alwyn was not particularly academic, and he left school at the age of 14 to work in the family grocery store. However he continued to play both the piano and the flute, his parents having bought him a second hand flute for his 14th birthday, and eventually his piano teacher, RW Strickland persuaded his father to let him study music full time.

He was recommended for admission to the Royal Academy of Music (RAM) by Mr Strickland, and after passing the entrance exam Alwyn started as a student at the age of 15, with flute as his main subject and piano his second. Initially he commuted from Northampton and his father paid for his studies, but eventually he persuaded his mother to let him stay in London, in digs found for him by Rubbra's father. During his first few years at the Academy he was very successful, and received several awards for flute. He also continued his efforts at composition; an early orchestral suite, '*Peter Pan*' incurred the wrath of the Principal of the RAM, Sir Alexander Mackenzie, for its unconventional changes of time signatures – the piece would eventually be performed a few years later under Sir Henry Wood, who became somewhat of a champion of Alwyn's music. Mackenzie, who had been appointed as Principal in 1888, had very traditional and rigid views; Debussy was not allowed to be performed because his music broke all the rules, and Puccini was condemned for his use of consecutive fifths.

Initially Alwyn was not allowed to study composition at the Academy, but his fortunes improved when he was allowed to transfer his theoretical studies from Mackenzie to John B McEwen, who was much more sympathetic to Alwyn's compositional efforts, and more wide-ranging in his musical tastes. He introduced Alwyn to the music of Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Szymanowski and Scriabin, and in particular to Debussy, his favourite. He encouraged Alwyn to compose by studying the scores of these and other composers rather than the academic text books of harmony and counterpoint, and he also broadened Alwyn's non-musical education, through his interest in philosophy. By the age of 17 Alwyn's studies were blossoming under McEwen, and it was also through McEwen that he was to meet his first wife, a fellow student of his, Olive Pull.

He met Olive while he was still only 17 – she was 23 at the time and was a talented pianist; she had also composed some piano pieces. Alwyn soon fell hopelessly in love, but his pursuit of Olive and his studies at the Academy came to a temporary halt following the death of his father from a brain tumour in 1923. Following this Alwyn went back to Northampton and only had weekly classes at the Academy. To earn some money he took a job as music master at a private school in Haslemere in the autumn of 1923. However during this time he continued to compose, and sent his compositions to McEwen for appraisal.

Family life and early musical career

Alwyn's romance with Olive continued mostly by correspondence, with occasional meetings in London. Life as a schoolmaster did not suit Alwyn and he left the school in November 1925 to return to Northampton, having in the meantime changed his name to William Alwyn – he thought 'Alwyn' was a more distinctive name than 'Smith' for an aspiring composer. Alwyn and Olive became engaged in 1927, though at this stage Alwyn's music career was far from secure. His ability as a flute player was well recognised and he had a steady number of engagements in bands and orchestras. His career took an upward turn when he was got an offer of 3rd flute & piccolo in the LSO for the three choirs Festival in August 1927 – he had the opportunity to play Elgar with Elgar conducting. This was to be the start of a lengthy association as a flautist with the LSO. His portfolio of compositions was also expanding – by now he had written 6 string quartets as well as a number of songs, piano pieces, and orchestral pieces. One of the latter, the '*5 preludes for orchestra*' was premiered at the proms on September 1927 by Henry Wood; after they had met Wood became a mentor to Alwyn, and a staunch supporter of his music.

Alwyn was now achieving increasing recognition for his playing and composing, and in 1928 was appointed Professor at the RAM. With his musical career now seemingly firmly established, Alwyn and Olive were

married on New Year's Day 1928; their first son Jonathan was born in October 1930. In November 1928 Alwyn's earlier orchestral piece 'Peter Pan' was transformed into a ballet with choreography by Ninette Valois, but apart from one other piece Alwyn did not pursue the composition of ballet music. A more significant premiere was that of his 1st piano concerto, dedicated to his lifelong friend Clifford Curzon and performed by him in Bournemouth on New Year's Eve 1931. The concerto had a second performance by Vivian Langrish and the LSO in December 1934 at the RAM, and received some positive reviews; the Times thought the work '*contained clear and decisive themes..... the general character is musical and the quiet ending contains real beauty*'⁵, while the Telegraph described it as taking the audience '*a step nearer modernity*'⁶. However the Musical Times rather condescendingly wrote: '*The rest (i.e. except the slow section) did not develop beyond the fashions of the moment. It appears that young composers have to work these things out of their system*'⁷.

In the 1930s Alwyn became increasingly in demand as a flautist in both solo and orchestral works. However this aspect of his career had to be put on hold when in 1932 he took up a post as examiner for the Associated Board of the Royal College of Music in Australia – altogether he was away for 9 months. This was followed just over a year after his return by another extended period away when he accepted a similar post in Canada. Although Alwyn continued composing during these periods of exile, one wonders what effect they had on his marriage and family life. Although Alwyn's letters are loving and passionate, perhaps these lengthy absences from home conditioned him for a more independent life outside marriage which increasingly became the pattern later on.

Among his compositions during this period were a number of orchestral 'vignettes', including an eclogue, *Aphrodite in Aulis*, and *The Innumerable Dance*, from William Blake's Milton; the latter was taken as the title of his

⁵ *TheTimes*, 6.12.1934.

⁶ *Daily Telegraph*, 5.12.1934.

⁷ *Musical Times*, November 1935.

biography of Alwyn by Adrian Wright. A significant development in Alwyn's musical career came in 1936, with his first music for film. This happened by chance, as Alwyn had been booked to play the flute for a score, written by another composer, Raymond Bennell, for the film '*The Future's in the Air*'. Because of some technical problem the recording was unsuccessful, and since Bennell was by then in Australia, there was a need for a new score rather quickly. The director Alexander Shaw asked Alwyn if he could write a new score, which he duly did and the score was well received. Other film commissions soon followed, particularly for the newly emerging genre of British documentary films, and this proved to be the beginning of what was to be a steady and lucrative source of income for Alwyn over the next 25 years – altogether he wrote over 200 film scores.

In June 1938 Alwyn and Olive's second son Nicholas was born and the family was now living in some comfort as a result of Alwyn's increasing income from film music as well as his engagements as a flautist. Other compositions continued; by now the number of string quartets had risen to 13, and in 1939 a violin concerto appeared, though because of the war its only performance was in 1940 with Alwyn at the piano (it was eventually recorded 50 years later). In 1939 Alwyn found that the pressures of his various strands of work were becoming too much, and decided to give up performance as an orchestral flautist in order to concentrate on composition. He also decided that it was time he turned his attention to more serious music and in particular to what he regarded as the highest form of music – the Symphony.

1939 Onwards – a 'Serious' Composer

In 1939 Alwyn declared himself dissatisfied with the bulk of his previous work, because of 'The woeful inadequacy of my technique....Did my technique match that of my musical gods – Bach, Mozart, Schumann, Puccini, Debussy, Stravinsky? No, a hundred times No! – first ideas had been too readily accepted, – too much padding, too many perfunctory bars. In 1939 I took the extreme step of disowning all my previous works

and mentally I made a new beginning.Each work must be polished and repolished until every join, every flaw was eliminated. My weak point, I thought had been neglect of contrapuntal line in favour of ear-tickling harmony, so I turned to a form of neo-classicism as a first answer to my problems.’⁸.

Alwyn’s severe self-castigation perhaps does him an injustice, particularly in his comparison with the musical greats; many a successful composer would be found wanting if measured against such high standards. Nonetheless, his resolve to write more serious music, and to take more time refining his compositions, led eventually to his first essays in symphonic form. However Alwyn’s lofty aims had to be postponed because of the war, during which he was increasingly in demand to compose music for the newly emerging genre of British documentary films. He did find time to write a number of smaller pieces, one of which, the *Pastoral Fantasia* for viola and orchestra, was premiered in full version by Adrian Boult and the BBC symphony orchestra in Bedford in November 1941 (the first performance in March 1940, without an orchestra, featured Clifford Curzon on piano and Watson Forbes on viola). Another premiere was *Overture to a Masque*, one of several new British works heard at the proms in 1940; the others included pieces by Vaughan Williams, Rubbra and Lennox Berkeley. A more substantial composition was *Concerto Grosso No.1*, commissioned by the BBC and written in 1943. These and other small pieces written during the war years were all in neo-classical style. Alwyn’s final major work of the war was the *Oboe Concerto*, composed between 1944 and 1945. This does not at all reflect the events of the times; it is a gentle piece in pastoral mood, full of subdued romanticism, and was eventually performed at the proms in 1949.

During the war the RAM closed, and musical life in London was drastically curtailed, but Alwyn kept himself busy with his work for documentaries and other composing, also as a member of a chamber group which had been

⁸ William Alwyn. *Winged Chariot*. In: *Composing in Words*, William Alwyn, ed Andrew Palmer, Toccata Press, 2009, pp 26-27.

formed in 1937 and gave radio broadcasts. He was not in active service because of a heart condition, but spent many nights with groups of fire-watchers. Early on in the war Alwyn had decided to move his family out of London – initially to Bisley (Glos.), where Olive's family were from, then to Welwyn Garden City. Alwyn continued with his life in London, and admitted to having various love affairs⁹ (9).

The situation Alwyn was in, spending most of his time in London while away from his family, was conducive to the latter, and in 1941 he met the woman who was to change his life, Doreen Carwithen. Carwithen was an 18 year old cello student and also an aspiring composer, and was assigned to Alwyn, then 36, for studies of harmony and counterpoint. According to Alwyn¹⁰ it was love at first sight, but although they spent increasing amounts of time together, it was a few years before they became lovers, probably in 1944.

After the war the family moved to a new home in Hampstead Garden Suburb. Alwyn continued his affair with Carwithen (by now re-christened 'Mary' in one of his letters). Although Alwyn strove to keep his affair secret from his family, it seems likely that Olive knew that something was going on, particularly as Carwithen was having some success with her compositions and Alwyn spent more time with her. Alwyn's own compositions immediately after the war were rather sparse, but one significant piece was *Manchester*, a symphonic suite adapted from film music. Appropriately this was premiered in the city by Sir John Barbirolli and the Halle orchestra. At a previous meeting with Barbirolli during recording of the film music, the conductor asked Alwyn what he was composing, and Alwyn replied 'my first Symphony'. Barbirolli promised to give the premiere at the Cheltenham Festival, and thus Alwyn's first symphony, completed in 1949, received its 1st performance at the 6th Cheltenham Festival in July 1950; a London

⁹ Brian Murphy. *A Pure flame: A Preface to the Life and Work of William alwyn*. USA: Honors College, Oakland University, Rochester, Michigan, 2000, p27.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p27.

performance followed at the proms in 1953. (*For detailed analysis and critics' reviews see Chapter 2*).

During the time that Alwyn was composing his 1st symphony he became ill, with increasing difficulty of swallowing, and required an operation on his throat. (*In his biography Adrian Wright says this is 1957, but it seems more likely to be 1947*). During his recovery period Olive banned him from seeing Carwithen for 6 weeks. Following the generally, but not ubiquitously, favourable reception of his 1st symphony, Alwyn began composing his second in the early 50s, and it was premiered, again by the Halle under Barbirolli. It had a warm reception by the audience but less so by the critics, who, Alwyn claimed, couldn't understand his unusual form – one movement divided into two parts. (*See Chapter 3 for detailed analysis*).

In the early to mid-fifties Alwyn was at the height of his career – he was well-respected in the RAM, his symphonies were played by one of the leading orchestras, and he was receiving commissions. Two major pieces which emerged during this period were a string quartet in 1953, named by Alwyn as his 1st, as he had disregarded the previous 13, and a harp concerto, *Lyra Angelica*, commissioned by the BBC for the proms in 1954. The latter is one of Alwyn's loveliest works, a romantic piece with quotes from the metaphysical poet Fletcher at the head of each movement. Another piece headed by a poetic quote was the tone poem *Autumn Legend* – this time the poet was Dante Gabriel Rossetti, indicating Alwyn's interest in the Pre-Raphaelites, whose paintings he had started collecting.

However in 1955 Alwyn suffered a severe blow to his prestige when he was turned down as Principal of the RAM to succeed Sir Reginald Thatcher, in favour of Sir Thomas Armstrong; the fact that he was having an affair with one of his students was probably one of the main issues which went against him. Alwyn had been expecting to be offered the post and was devastated, especially as he was hoping for a knighthood that usually went with the appointment – he resigned from the Academy in March 1955. Soon after this he was offered the position of Head of Music for BBC TV, but somewhat

surprisingly turned it down, thereby losing the chance to have considerable influence on the musical tastes of a growing audience, much wider than through his work at the Academy. These two events marked the beginning of a decline in Alwyn's involvement in musical life in London.

His personal life too was beginning to unravel – his marriage to Olive was increasingly unhappy, and he was spending more and more time with 'Mary' (as Alwyn had re-christened Carwithen); the double life he was leading began to have an effect on his health. His mother died in September 1955, which added to his depressive mood. The diary he kept for about a year between 1955 and 1956, named 'Ariel to Miranda' gives some idea of his busy domestic and professional life, but makes no mention of his mistress¹¹. It does however give some insight into the composition of the 3rd symphony, with which Alwyn was grappling at this time. This is in somewhat darker and harsher vein than the previous two, and one has the impression that Alwyn was struggling to find a balance between the violent and experimental music he had set himself to write and his innate tendency towards romanticism (*see chapter 4 for further details and analysis*). The 3rd symphony was premiered under Beecham in October 1956 at the Royal Festival Hall; critics were mostly positive, one describing it as an 'angry new symphony'¹². Other music in the late 50s included the *Elizabethan Dances*, an appealing set of pieces commissioned by the BBC for a festival of light music in 1957, and his 4th symphony, premiered at the Royal Albert Hall in 1959 under Barbirolli. This was the most profound and grandiose of the four (*for detailed review and analysis see chapter 5*). The symphony, and the 2nd piano concerto, commissioned by the BBC in 1960 but never performed, were to be the last major pieces written by Alwyn for some considerable time, as his musical career, and his life, were about to undergo a major change.

¹¹ Adrian Wright. *The Innumerable Dance*, Boydell Press 2008, p147.

¹² Charles Reid. *Daily Telegraph*, 11.10.1956.

The affair with Carwithen was putting a strain on both her and Alwyn's health, and Mary increasingly tried to persuade Alwyn to leave Olive and live with her. Alwyn had resisted this final step for some years, but eventually began to discuss it with his son Nicholas, who advised against it, and with a friend, Dr Shepherd, who advised him to take the plunge, and offered to act as intermediary between him and Olive. Finally on 19th April he moved in with Mary at a small cottage in Blythburgh, near the Suffolk coast; Mary had previously purchased this after they had both visited the area some time before, and once Alwyn was settled there he was never to see Olive again, except for a chance meeting at a funeral.

The Blythburgh Years

Although Alwyn was initially very happy to be living with Mary, the move, and estrangement from his family must have had a detrimental effect on his health, as after 6 months he suffered a complete nervous breakdown, and it took almost 2 years before he recovered completely. It was during this period that he began drawing and painting, and also completed '*Early Closing*', an autobiography of his childhood and early youth – this was initially only published privately, but eventually became part of his book '*Composing in Words*'¹³. Some composing continued while he was ill – piano pieces *Movements* (which became sonata No.2) and a clarinet sonata appeared during these years. However in 1963 he started work on a film commission but was unable to complete it and it was given to Ron Goodwin – this would be the end of his career as a film composer. Shortly afterwards he received a commission from the BBC for a piece to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the death of Sir Henry Wood – this became *Concerto Grosso No.3*, and was performed at the proms in 1964.

His son Nicholas never forgave Alwyn for breaking up the family, and although Jonathan was more conciliatory, both children and their families

¹³ William Alwyn. *Composing in Words*, William Alwyn, ed Andrew Palmer, Toccata Press, 2009.

were infrequent visitors; apparently Mary's cool welcome and rudimentary hospitality did not encourage such visits¹⁴. There's no doubt that Alwyn's isolation from London's musical life resulted in less recognition, and a further disadvantage was his choice of location, just a few miles from Aldeburgh, where Britten had already established an international reputation; almost inevitably Alwyn would be classified as 'the other Suffolk composer'.

The cottage was small with poor facilities, and after a couple of years they moved into a new more spacious house which was built for them just across the road. Alwyn settled into an artistic life, spending more time in painting and writing poems than composing. However in 1969 he received another commission for a piece to be played at the Cheltenham Festival – this was the *Sinfonietta*, played at the Festival of 1970. This and his 5th symphony were the only major orchestral pieces composed after he moved to Blythburgh. The 5th symphony started life as an overture, commissioned for the Norfolk and Norwich Festival, but as Alwyn expanded it, it became a one-movement symphony, and received its premiere at the Festival in October 1973. It was dedicated to Thomas Browne, a 17th century Norwich physician, philosopher, botanist and archaeologist, and named '*Hydriotaphia, or Urn Burials*'. Despite the somewhat arcane designation, it is a terse (15 minutes) and cogently argued work which received more critical acclaim than most of his previous symphonies (*see chapter 6 for analysis*), and a 2nd performance followed at the RFH in 1980. The only other piece from the early 70s was the 2nd string quartet, finished in 1975.

In fact most of Alwyn's composition time at Blyburgh was spent writing two operas. The first, '*Juan, or the Libertine*' was based loosely on the story of Don Juan, but set in 'the republic of England'. Alwyn wrote the libretto himself, and completed it in 1965, but he struggled with the music and altogether the opera took him 7 years to complete. During this time Britten had composed several operas, including '*The Prodigal Son*' and '*Owen Wingrave*', to national and international acclaim, and there was little interest

¹⁴ Adrian Wright. *The Innumerable Dance*, Boydell Press 2008, p190.

in Alwyn's opera when it was eventually finished – it has never been performed. The second opera, 'Miss Julie', fared slightly better. Alwyn had been interested in Strindberg's play ever since seeing it in the 1930s, and during the 1950s he collaborated with Christopher Halsall, a librettist, to write a libretto for a potential opera. However there were some disagreements and the project was abandoned. It was taken up by Alwyn again at Blythburgh, and he finished the libretto himself in 1971, though the music would take another 5 years. The BBC arranged rehearsals and a performance at Brent Town Hall in February 1977, to mixed reviews. However despite the interest created by the performance, and by a subsequent recording in 1983, it proved impossible to persuade opera companies to stage it, and it remained unperformed during Alwyn's lifetime, though it did eventually receive a staged premiere 21 years after completion.

Alwyn had for some time been trying to persuade Olive to grant him a divorce, and after holding out for many years, she eventually relented and a settlement was reached in November 1974; Alwyn and Mary were married in April of the following year. At the end of 1974 Lyrita arranged for recordings of the first four symphonies, with Alwyn conducting. In the late 70s he composed mostly song cycles, several set to poems by Michael Armstrong; the last one, 'Seascapes' appeared in 1980.

In the last few years of his life, Alwyn became embittered by the neglect of his music, particularly the symphonies and operas, as evidenced by correspondence with Elizabeth Lutyens, a kindred spirit who also felt spurned by the musical establishment¹⁵. In fact Alwyn was not as neglected as he made out: his 70th birthday was honoured by a banquet at the Savile Club attended by various musical luminaries; in 1978 he was awarded a CBE, and in 1981 an honorary D.Mus by Leicester University. His recordings of the symphonies had received favourable reviews, particularly in the USA, and he was still receiving commissions as late as 1980 (*Concerto for flute*). In November 1980 the BBC had planned a concert of Alwyn's music which

¹⁵ William Alwyn. Letter to Elizabeth Lutyens, 20.10.1976 (see *The Innumerable Dance*, p 252).

he was to conduct, but unfortunately this was cancelled owing to a musicians' strike.

In 1981 he started work on a new opera, '*L'Ile des Escalves*', but his health was worsening and in April of that year he suffered a stroke – this was 5 days after Olive died (*probably coincidental considering his later diagnosis*). He returned home in June, but recovery was slow and in September he was diagnosed with myeloma. Arthritis in his hands made composing increasingly difficult, but after a struggle he wrote two final pieces; a *Chaconne for recorder*, and the *3rd string quartet*, finished in 1983. The quartet was performed at the Aldeburgh Festival in June 1985, and shortly afterwards tumours were found on Alwyn's lungs and brain. He was transferred to Southwold Hospital and died there on 11 September 1985, with Mary by his side.

Mary continued to live in the house at Blythburgh for another 14 years and worked tirelessly to promote Alwyn and his music. She set up the William Alwyn Foundation, sorting out all his papers with the help of other devotees, and arranged and financed further recordings of his music, including the symphonies. It was mainly through her ministrations that 'Miss Julie' finally had its World Premiere, at the Norfolk and Norwich Festival in 1997; as with the original recorded performance, reviews were mixed. In 1999 Mary had a stroke and she spent the last few years of her life in various nursing homes; she died in January 2003.

CHAPTER 2

Symphony No.1 – A “Classical” Symphony

Introduction

Considering Alwyn's intended 'grand design', and his pronouncement that he was embarking on new symphonic paths¹⁶, one might have expected something unconventional, perhaps a single movement symphony. Instead, the First is outwardly conventional in form, with four movements, including the traditional scherzo and adagio. There is no stated key, but the general movement is towards D major, which is the final destination of the finale. Although Alwyn's first essay in symphonic form is quite traditional in its four-movement structure, his handling of thematic development and tonality is distinctively individual. He prefers short phrases ("seeds", as Alwyn calls them [1]) rather than extended themes, though the beautiful theme in the slow movement is an exception, and instead of being conventionally developed these themes take on different characteristics as the movement progresses. This is particularly true in the first movement, where the apparently innocuous semitone progression in octaves (motif 3) becomes the basis of the major key climax towards the end of the movement. Indeed the minor second progression is used extensively in all four movements. Of course this "transformation of themes" is not new, being exploited by Liszt and others, but Alwyn gives it his own distinctive brand.

Tonally the symphony is a journey from the opening D minor (Dorian mode) to the D major of the final movement. Although D major seems to be the destination of the first movement it is replaced by the minor mode at the end with the **ff** re-appearance of the opening theme (a very effective moment), suggesting further struggles to come. The *Scherzo* second movement begins and ends in C major, but the third movement takes us back to D minor. However, this is soon transformed to F major, which becomes the main key

¹⁶ Adrian Wright. *The Innumerable Dance*, Boydell Press 2008, p 119 (see also Ref. 1).

of the movement, although there are still hints of D minor in some sections, and particularly at the end, preparing us for the D major opening of the last movement.

2.1 First movement - structural proportion

Although the four-movement design of the symphony is outwardly conventional, the structure of the first movement shows no traces of conventional sonata form. It is essentially in three sections: a slow introduction containing several motifs, which gradually builds to a climax, then accelerates into the '*Allegro*' second section. After another climax there is an extended *Andante* third section which eventually subsides into a recreation, notably amplified, of the opening mood. Thus the overall structure can be considered as an arch; however, the central *Allegro* is somewhat understated, with little development of the opening themes, which only really display their potential in the third section. So perhaps the movement might best be described as an inverted arch.

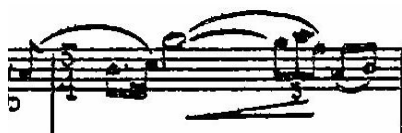
The movement begins *adagio* with a thematic idea in cellos and basses, somewhat reminiscent of the dark opening of Sibelius's Fourth Symphony, though without the added piquancy there of the tritone. This promising theme seems full of potential for development, but, significantly, is not heard again until towards the end of the movement. The key is somewhat indeterminate, but the opening phrase has a suggestion of D minor albeit with a strong Dorian inflection with its B natural in the scale (Ex. 1: 'motif 1'). This B natural is emphasised in the answering phrase in the woodwind (Ex. 2: 'motif 2a'), and, through its length and configuration (rising to the C above), creates a passing allusion to C major. However the violins extend this motif with a downward finish, introducing an E flat, thus extinguishing all thoughts of C major with a long C# pedal on the timpani and basses. Just before this the violins continue motif 2 up to G, the rhythmic fragment (Ex. 3: motif 2b), proving to be an important element in subsequent phrases.



Example 1: Symphony No. 1, i, Motif 1



Example 2: Symphony No. 1, i, Motif 2a



Example 3: Symphony No. 1, i, Motif 2b



Example 4: Symphony No. 1, i, Motif 3

Alwyn would seem to reinforce the sense of D as a tonic with the strong presence of dominant harmony (especially the presence of the C# pedal in the bass) after letter A, and the further reiteration of 'Motif 2a' in another

variant (Ex. 4: motif 3). Variations of this soaring phrase are used extensively in subsequent sections of the movement. At this point the brass enter with subdued chords, initially also with dominant harmony. However, Alwyn is determined to cloud the waters. Though the C# pedal is retained at letter B, dominant harmony is jettisoned as the music attempts to pull in different tonal directions - towards V of F# and towards F. At the climax, indeed, F appears to prevail as the C# pedal sinks to C natural, though Alwyn avoids an unequivocal cadence, leaving an air of tonal uncertainty as the tempo accelerates into the '*Allegro ritmico*'.

In contrast to the richer thematic 'seed bed' of the introduction, the opening of the *Allegro* focuses more on rhythmical dynamism in its rhetoric for unison woodwind and strings. This material, derived from Motif 2a and Motif 3, explores a new tonal area, that of A minor, and further thematic material which grows out of this paragraph recalls other motivic cells from the introduction. What is of paramount motivic importance, however, is the prevalence of the semitone motive heard at the very opening. At letter G, for instance, Alwyn's more lyrical effusions are derived almost solely from Motif 1 and this material combines seamlessly with the more rhythmically boisterous semiquaver motion maintained up to letter H.

Example 5: Symphony No. 1, i, Secondary thematic paragraph



Example 6: Symphony No. 1, i, Opening of paragraph in D major

At this juncture, while the rhythmical dimension continues to be emphasised, Alwyn introduces a secondary thematic paragraph. Of particular importance here are the tonal allusions. On the one hand the first two bars appear to articulate dominant harmony of F#, while the third and fourth bars make reference to dominant harmony of D, two tonalities (F# and D) which have already proved to be of some importance in the introduction (see Ex. 5). Moreover, at the conclusion to this passage, further thematic departures in the upper strings are also suggestive of C major and E minor, reiterating the unsettled nature of the tonal behaviour established at the opening. And as if to accentuate this prevailing sense of uncertainty, the Allegro falters at letter H, and the tonality is left in mid-air on the dominant of F#.

Embodied in the very gesture in the cellos and basses - C# - D - C natural after letter L, are those tonal areas which have been articulated so far: (i) C# refers to the preponderance of the dominant of F#; (ii) D to the opening polarity of the movement - and the two pitches juxtaposed to the importance of Motifs 2a and 3. The immediate juxtaposition, however, of C natural, which negates both the possibility of F# (minor) and D, sets up the possibility of F major. Nevertheless, Alwyn is ultimately attempting to throw us 'off the scent', for, in time, the wonderfully soaring, angular melody of the first violins, reminiscent perhaps of the Mahlerian shapes prevalent in the 'Adagietto' of that composer's Fifth Symphony (Ex. 6), and heavily imbued with the stepwise 'cells' suggested by Motifs 2a and 3, soon lead to a clearer, diatonic

statement of D, and one that is more unequivocally evident in the perfect cadence into letter M. At this point Alwyn embarks upon a powerful and massive process of tonicisation in which D major deliberately becomes the principal focus of the movement as a whole. In this sense, gone are the ambiguities of the introduction and Allegro sections, and the presence of the initial horn solo almost seems to invoke that message of stability that one finds in the codas to the symphonies of Brahms (notably in the Second Symphony, also in D major). Yet, those tonalities of previous sections have not entirely gone away, and Alwyn uses them as arresting 'digressions' throughout this essentially stable phase. This is evident, example, at bar 7 of letter M, where the goal of the falling bass line has been C - for here the tonality temporarily shifts to F until the 6/4 of D at letter N. Similarly at O, hints of A minor and references to the 'unison' semiquaver material, refer to the Allegro.

Yet, in creating this blaze of tonic colour, Alwyn takes the opportunity to provide a substantial newly reworked paragraph in which the thematic material of the introduction is extensively restated, now in an environment of stability, and, in so doing, establishes an impressive aura of recapitulation, though with the additional ingredient of 'coalescence' where the various fragments of the introduction come together to form a new, optimistic interpretation not unlike the '*Durchbrechung*' which is encountered in Mahler. One of the most impressive elements is the accentuation of the semitone motive (2a and 3) which becomes virtually an *idée fixe* as the large-scale melody unfolds (see the passagework before letter P) and how, after the masterly surprise of the subdominant (at letter P itself), this is worked almost *ad nauseam* (note the multiple presentation of upward appoggiaturas) to the final climax at letter Q when C# and D, so baldly referred to at letter L, are presented as the heroic apogee of the movement's musical argument. Quizzically, however, the climax itself has a cryptic quality in that instead of accentuating D *major*, Alwyn states D *minor*, the key of the introduction and further emphasises the link with a Strauss-like restatement of the opening theme (Motif 1) in the trombones. The continued C#-D motifs in the lower strings and bassoons now firmly establish D minor, and the 'tempo primo'

marking and the re-appearance of the first theme clearly mark the beginning of what turns out to be a short coda. The intensity subsides, and the movement finishes *ppp* with a minor third interval onto D in clarinets and violas, over a D bass pedal.

The events of this movement pose a number of searching questions. Its shorter length is clearly at odds with the normative conventions of opening movements whose intent is usually to establish a statement of spacious intellectual treatment. Though Alwyn's material has 'spacious' rhetorical attributes, the movement's brevity initiates a sense of deficit, where we are left with the need for resolution and the inevitable feeling that the symphony must go on in order to achieve that desire for balance and proportion. The movement's form is also unusual and adds to the pervading impression of imbalance. The tripartite construction poses several interesting questions. In one sense, the introduction, which provides the thematic 'seed bed' to the movement could be interpreted as a form of exposition, in that it also outlines the tonal areas of D, F# minor and F. In sonata terms, the Allegro that follows might fairly be interpreted as developmental phase in that it reworks the material of the introduction. Yet, of course, Alwyn's use of rhetorical devices - a slower introduction followed by an Allegro - also suggests something more conventional - that the Allegro is itself the principal expositional agency of the movement. Yet a further conception could also be considered in that the introduction and Allegro are in fact *both* expositional and operate as two larger dialectical thematic areas, one reworking thematic material from the other (roles which should therefore beg the reassignment of terms such as 'introduction'). The prevailing question for all these interpretations is that the conventional role of an extended developmental phase is absent, one excised perhaps by Alwyn's 'through-composed' process of continuous development and transformation of thematic material. What is unequivocal about the structural design, however, is the final apotheosis in D major which expunges those tonally quizzical elements of both introduction and Allegro. Indeed, Alwyn's peroration seems almost excessive and its disproportionate stability has the effect of reconfiguring our perception of the tripartite scheme to one of 'end-weighted' focus. In other words, Alwyn clearly wished the

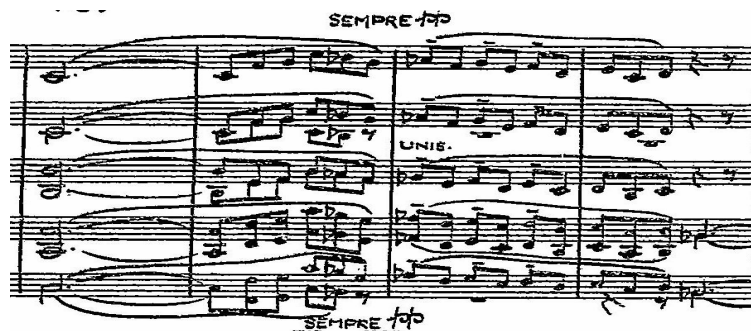
conclusion to be the *main event* of the movement, and for this remarkable statement to linger in the mind as a major point of reference for later structural 'happenings' in the symphony as a whole. Indeed, it may be that Alwyn's larger intention, as we shall see, was to use the first movement in its entirety as a form of Prelude or Introduction to the larger meta-structure.

2.2. A 'Classical' Scherzo

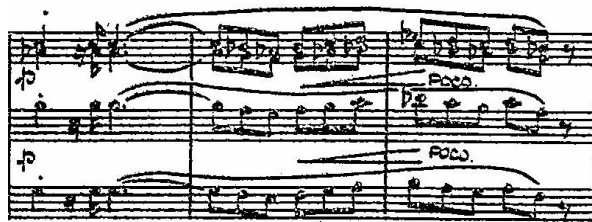
The second movement is, at least in form, a classic Scherzo, with a number of *meno mosso* sections interspersed for contrast. It is everything a Scherzo should be: light, witty, playful, fast moving and full of energy and the orchestration is appropriately brilliant. Much of the metrical energy is derived from the use of hemiola bars (3 duplets in 6/8) and varying time signatures (9/8, 12/8) among the basic 6/8 metre, so that the predominant sense of compound duple does not feel at all monotonous. The general form is ABA and is imbued with strong Beethovenian allusions; additionally, within each of the *meno mosso* sections there are 'internal' *scherzando* episodes with reworkings of motifs from the opening Scherzo, so that the whole movement is impressive for its intricate integration. With its 'Will o'the wisp' velocity and lightness the *scherzando* theme is reminiscent of Holst's *Mercury* from *The Planets*, and there are also echoes of corresponding essays by Elgar and Walton. However, the piece is far from being stylistically derivative, and strongly proclaims Alwyn's individual voice.

The Scherzo begins with another of Alwyn's tonally equivocal statements. The first two unison passages for strings by no means state C major unequivocally, an effect which is heightened by the concluding contradictory B flat which then proceeds to establish itself as a pedal point (Ex. 7). In answer to this material comes a secondary statement in the woodwind (Ex. 8). The curtailed triplet rhythm at the end of this phrase becomes a major feature of the scherzo sections, and is especially effective immediately before the hemiola bars (*viz* 3 bars before letter B). Bassoons and horns join in, then at letter A the opening phrase is repeated, this time starting at B flat,

in cellos and basses, with the four-note phrase of the second bar overlapping in violas, violins and flutes – an effective touch. As before there is a whole-tone descent at the end of the phrase, now reaching A flat in the cellos and basses. After various interjections from horns, trumpets and clarinets, including a curious waltz-like rhythm from horns, which will form the basis of the 1st meno mosso section (Ex. 9), the material attempts to make its way back to C, but the preponderance of the B flat leads, perhaps inevitably, to F at letter B (and to the minor mode, anticipated by the A flats of the opening statement). At this point the horns introduce a jaunty, swinging theme, worthy of Malcolm Arnold (Ex. 10) in which the sequential phraseology also reflects the same downward whole-tone descent from C to A flat in woodwind and strings. This entire section is underpinned by the presence of F minor and much of its harmonic colour is distinctly reminiscent of Walton's First Symphony, a work which would have undoubtedly made its mark on Alwyn after its performances in 1934 and 1935.



Example 7: Symphony No. 1, ii, opening statement (antecedent)



Example 8: Symphony No. 1, ii, opening statement (consequent)



Example 9: Symphony No. 1, ii, secondary statement



Example 10: Symphony No. 1, ii,

The predominance of the subdominant minor yields at this juncture to the first of the '*Meno mosso*' episodes where Alwyn, in a conventional sense, opts for the dominant, though with a variation, to the *minor* mode. At this juncture, with the slackening of tempo, the 'dance' character of the movement becomes more defined in a graceful 'waltz' (Ex. 11). In shifting to its own dominant, D minor, a secondary, contrasting idea is spawned at letter K which is subsequently expanded as a song-like foil to the waltz material, though this tonal excursion is largely preparatory for the 'Trio' (B section) in G major (marked '*poco meno mosso*') where Alwyn's quasi-Elgarian melody, firmly characterised by its diatonicism, provides a strong tonal anchor.



Example 11: Symphony No. 1, ii, 'meno mosso' episode.



Example 12: Symphony No. 1, ii, secondary material of 'meno mosso'.



Example 13: Symphony No. 1, ii, 'Trio'.

The Trio, however, is strangely brief in its appearance, rendering the recapitulation of the A section that much more precipitate (at letter P). Here Alwyn restates much of the initial Scherzo literally but breaks into the material 'mid-way', without reference to the opening unison idea. Moreover, the Scherzo itself, for all its allusions to literal repetition, is severely truncated (as one finds in Beethovenian examples) in order to reintroduce the 'waltz' idea and this material in turn provides a transition to the 'displaced' unison idea which returns simultaneously with the Trio melody (four before letter V) in the tonic, C major. This thematic simultaneity signals the coda, though, in order to tie the strong subdominant presence of F minor in the Scherzo, Alwyn, who has not only used the subdominant as a means of obliquely recapitulating the Scherzo at letter P, reiterates the importance of the tonality by introducing the unison idea *on* the subdominant. Moreover, subdominant inflections play a major part in the Trio material after letter V, and it is by no means clear when we arrive at the goal of the climbing bass line after letter W that we have reached C, since the feeling is surely more strongly that of the *dominant of F*. Alwyn continues, thereafter, to deflect our attention by falling to the ambiguous B flat before this is 'corrected' in the last bar when we land finally on an unequivocal C.

This movement is in many ways more straightforward than the 1st movement. The structure is fairly recognisable, with scherzo and trio sections, and the

harmony reasonably conventional. However within these conventional structures Alwyn is wonderfully inventive and original, and the way he throws his themes around different sections of the orchestra shows his mastery of orchestration. The movement is remarkably flexible in rhythm, with the use of curtailed triplets and hemiola sections, as well as irregular time signatures. The different themes seem to grow out of each other in a natural way; in particular the “romantic” theme of the second *meno mosso* section (Ex. 12, letter H), is closely related to the opening theme, as emphasised during the quiet passage preceding the reprise of the scherzo (between letters N & O). Also within each *meno mosso* section elements of the scherzo are introduced, so that these sections form an integrated part of the movement, rather than being completely separated. In the closing pages the Elgarian theme (Ex. 13) is combined with scherzo triplets and also the “romantic” theme in full orchestra to form a satisfying coda, perhaps reminiscent of the finale of Elgar’s 1st Symphony.

Harmonically the movement starts and ends in C major, and after a subdominant minor section (letter B), and a short A minor passage we reach D major for the 2nd *meno mosso* theme at letter K. However this soon proves to be a lengthy dominant preparation for G major, the key of the 3rd *meno mosso* section at letter M. C major returns towards the end of the latter section, and then the reprise of the scherzo starts again with the F minor passage from letter B. Within each of these sections there is a fair amount of harmonic fluidity in typical Alwyn fashion, with the three whole tone descent being a prominent feature; simultaneous rising and descending chromatic sequences in different parts are also extensively used. The coda is firmly in C major, but with much chromatic movement beneath.

Overall this movement exudes energy, confidence and optimism, and is an orchestral tour de force.

2.3 A Lyrical Slow Movement

The slow movement - tantamount to an 'Interlude' - is even more conventional than the scherzo, being a simple ABA format, the two versions of the song-like theme being separated by a more agitated passage. Tonally there is little deviation from the main key of F major, together with its dominant minor and the latter's dominant (i.e. C minor and G), except for a rather beautiful, indeed striking modulation to E at the beginning of the *piu mosso* section.

Inherent in the opening, soft horn chords is a tonal ambiguity to which Alwyn will make further reference. Though the predominant sense is one of F major, the added sixth of D undoubtedly injects seeds of doubt, and the entrance of the plaintive introductory theme on cor anglais (Example 14), with its own significant set of pitch emphases on D and F only serve to heighten the ambiguity. Indeed, the cadence at bar 9 and the bridge to the beginning of the main thematic departure is a further case in point.



Example 14: Symphony No. 1, iii, introductory theme

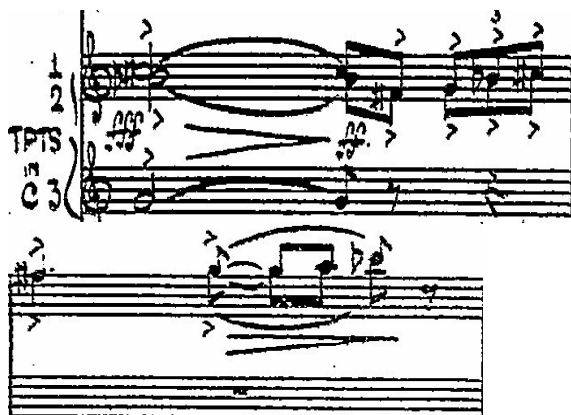
Initially the key is suggestive of D minor, and this appears to be confirmed at the end of the phrase, with a D/A open 5th bass in bassoons and harp, and D minor triads in woodwind. However the final descending phrase in cellos and basses unexpectedly turns back to F and this, in spite of the 'bluff', becomes the key of the main theme, a beautiful, simple and elegant melody for violas, accompanied after a few bars by bassoons and with gentle triplets in F from timps. (Ex. 15).



Example 15: Symphony No. 1, iii, main theme

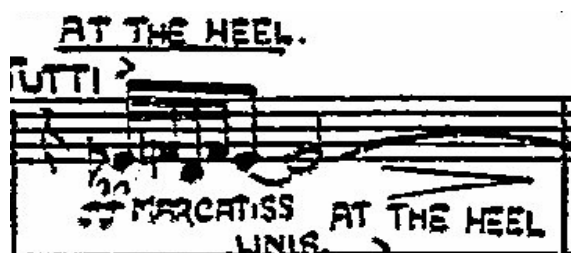
The other strings join in towards the end of the melody, then at letter B, as the rest of the woodwind enter, the melody is repeated in F minor, with full strings, woodwind and horns. With the turn to the minor mode, Alwyn marks the passage “espressivo” and “warmly”, and this more full-blooded version of the theme is injected with a new pathos.

After a return to the major mode and a strong, structurally-defining cadence at letter D, Alwyn precipitately takes us to E major, and the start of a *piu mosso* section. (This minor second interval key change echoes that in the Scherzo and can be regarded as derived from the minor second intervals which are so prominent in the first movement). The sense of E major is, nevertheless, undermined by the presence of the flattened seventh, and before long the tonality is quitted for C minor. C minor and its dominant G continue to predominate in this *piu mosso* section, as the music increases in intensity, with much use of a typical Alwyn fingerprint – descending scales in strings over ascending scales in brass. A rising triplet motif in strings, horns and bassoons leads to an *fff* climax, with a declamatory outburst in trumpets (Ex. 16). This moment serves as the point of highest tension in the movement, for, as the climax



Example 16: Symphony No. 1, iii

subsides, the solo violin's reiteration of the E flat – D motif previously heard, over harp arpeggios and B-D tremolos in 2nd violins creates a new tension. The B-D tremolos suggest a continuation of G, but the E flat persists in the violin arpeggios, and is further emphasised in a declamatory phrase for violins, echoed by the woodwind (Ex. 17); this phrase was previously heard on cor anglais at letter E.



Example 17: Symphony No. 1, iii,

Although the cellos and basses reach F, the continued use of E flat is perhaps suggestive of dominant harmony (Ex. 18), and Alwyn no doubt intended to accentuate this sensation through its subsequent prolongation.



Example 18: Symphony No. 1, iii

But the harmony also has the potential, enharmonically, as an augmented sixth harmony to return to E; moreover, the 'flattened seventh' nature of the

harmony is also, of course, derived from the same harmony initiated on E, with its inherent sense of instability. As the melodic lines and the accompaniment climb in both register and intensity, the orientation towards F increases with introduction of the dominant seventh of F itself, and the unequivocal presence of F is finally confirmed when the cor anglais's thematic material returns in the upper strings (Ex. 19).



Example 19: Symphony No. 1, iii, preparation for recapitulation of main theme

Here Alwyn exercises considerable *legerdemain* in re-introducing this idea on the dominant F before the main thematic idea returns at letter J. Even, however, with this confirmation of the movement's tonality, Alwyn reminds us, through the insistent use of rising appoggiaturas (notably those of C# and G#) that D minor is still latent. Indeed, further hints of D minor are given in the closing bars, where the horns play the main theme pianissimo and the strings contribute their enigmatic C#s in the final (V – I) cadence (Ex. 20).



Example 20: Symphony No. 1, iii, final cadence

In keeping with the idea of an 'interlude' or 'intermezzo', this slow movement is uncomplicated in its tripartite design. Nevertheless, Alwyn's artifice is

always present, notably in the relationship between tonal and thematic events. Moreover, it is significant in the important cyclic thread of D minor which opened the symphony.

2.4. A Jubilant Finale

Alwyn says of this movement, entitled '*Allegro Jubilante*': "...it is probably the most extrovert piece I have ever written" (1). He also says that there is little development, each idea spontaneously generating a new idea. Here Alwyn perhaps does himself an injustice in implying a lack of development, as there is a clear structure, with extensive exploration of the main motifs and some elements which hark back to earlier movements on the symphony. The movement certainly lives up to its title, the jubilant mood prevailing almost throughout, with just a few quieter passages to provide variety. Rhythmic variety and metrical disruption are also prominent, as in the scherzo, with the basic 3/4 rhythm being interrupted by 3/8 bars, as well as 2/4 and 4/4.

It is also significant that Alwyn does not stray too far from the opening D major; although the middle section contains passages in the flat submediant (Bflat), relative minor (B minor), tonic minor and supertonic minor (E minor), the return to D major via the supertonic major and then the dominant at letter U is emphatically straightforward and D major continues almost unchallenged until the end.

Alwyn give us several reminders of the earlier movements in this finale, some more obvious than others. The four chord progression in horns at letter E is very similar to the opening of the third movement, and the whole-tone descent near the beginning reminds us vividly of the scherzo. More subtly, the octave leaps in strings and woodwind following letter C are a quicker version of the swinging octave motif (motif 3) from the first movement. The sudden appearance of the latter motif in D minor right at the end of the movement is unexpected and effective, and gives the final bars in D major

increased emphasis, providing a fitting climax to the movement, and the symphony.

There are three main motifs which give weight to the structural design of the movement:

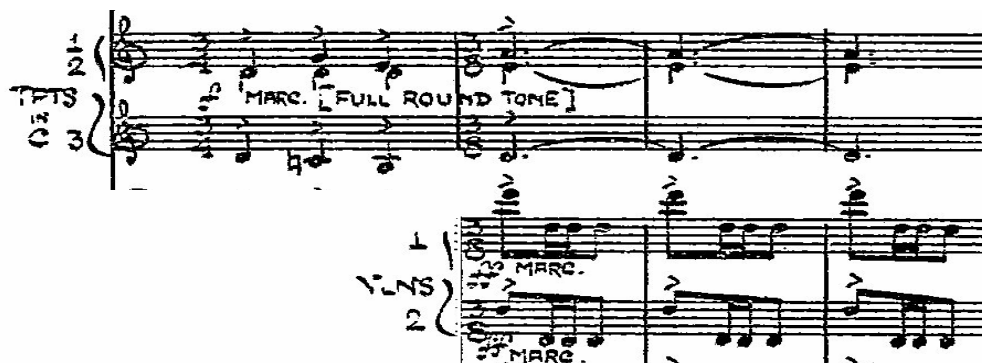
- (a) Motif 1, a rhythmical element with distinct references to the scherzo:
- (b) Motif 2, a simple minor key progression with an octave leap in the middle:
- (c) Motif 3, a rising progression of four chords, which dominates the later part of the movement and provides the penultimate climax.



Example 21: Symphony No. 1, iv, opening motif



Example 22: Symphony No. 1, iv, motif 2



Example 23: Symphony No. 1, iv, motif 3

The movement begins with a very positive and energetic rhythmic passage in D major, which introduces motif 1 (Ex. 21). Straightaway we are reminded of the Scherzo with its rhythmic energy and uneven bar lengths (note the first seven bars). At bar 10 there are further reminders of the scherzo with three progressive whole-tone descents, and at letter A the lower strings and percussion play a militaristic repeated note rhythm, very similar to that in the first movement Allegro (Ex. 24); this rhythm is clearly the genesis of the repeated note rhythm in 3/8 which forms part of Motif 3.



Example 24: Symphony No. 1, iv

The whole-tone descents take us down to B flat, and a few bars later there is a further descent to A minor, 5 bars before B with a characteristic repeated note rhythm followed by a minor 3rd sequence in horns, which introduces motif 2 in bass trombones and tuba (Ex. 22). This latter motif is not heard again until much later in the movement, and is another example of Alwyn introducing an important theme in an innocuous way. The quaver-semiquaver rhythm is subsequently taken up by the whole orchestra, the harmonies gradually moving back toward D major, eventually reached at letter D. Six bars before D, a chromatic phrase for brass and woodwinds

encapsulates one of Alwyn's favourite devices - concurrent rising and descending elements (Ex. 25).



Example 25: Symphony No. 1, iv

The opening phrases of the movement (motif 1) are heard again in strings and woodwind 4 bars before D, and further developed in different sections of the orchestra in the subsequent bars. Seven bars after D there is the same V-I cadence as in the opening phrases, but after another 2 bars a 3/8 rhythm presages the introduction of motif 3 at letter E (curiously one that Vaughan Williams would use extensively in the first movement of his Eighth Symphony), with the rising phrase for brass as a 3/4 bar, followed by three 3/8 bars with an octave leap, emphasised in full woodwind and strings (Ex. 22). This theme now becomes the mainstay of the movement and is extensively developed.

This 4-note phrase is very similar to its verticalised counterpart of the horn chords in the introduction to the slow movement. The pattern is repeated, with some harmonic progression but returning to D major, then taken up by harp and woodwind at letter F. Here Alwyn's use of rhetoric is significant, for it almost as though he were emulating the buoyant sounds of a march, a feeling confirmed by the tonal shift to B flat major and the marked change of musical gesture to strings (marked 'Sul G'). Yet, though we might sense the idea of a 'trio' section, Alwyn undermines this structural stereotype when the tonality shifts upward to B minor (letter J), accentuating the now growing impression of a sonata development (even though a second-subject area has not been clearly defined). Here a variation of motif 3 is heard in brass, this time with the 3/8 rhythm set against the rising brass chords in 3/4 (Ex. 26). This shift to B minor also accentuates again the underlying motivic presence of the rising semitone established in the first movement and this is

further highlighted at letter K with the 'pesante' waltz (note the use of C#-D, hinting strongly at a return of D).

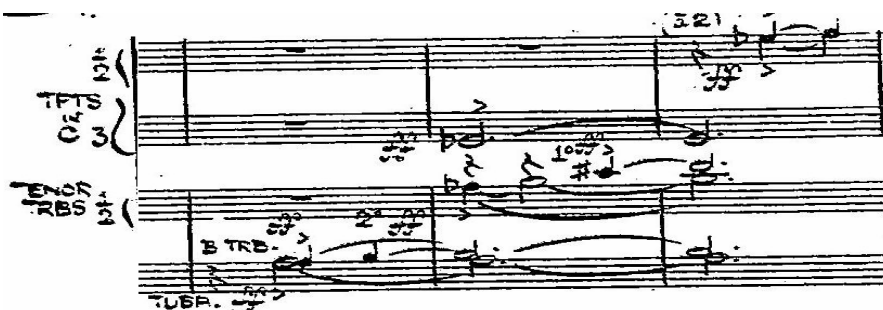
Example 26: Symphony No. 1, iv, variation of main theme (motif 3)

But while D as a tonality may be impatiently waiting in the wings, Alwyn retreats from what would be a premature return. Instead, at letter L, the cellos enter a new phase of development with a subtle variant of motif 2 (the leap being a flattened seventh instead of an octave); this is the beginning of a long subdued and somewhat mysterious 'fantasy' section based on this theme (Ex. 27):

Example 27: Symphony No. 1, iv, variation of motif 2

In fact much of this section is infected by the 'waltz' character (established at K) which is now used as a transitional means of arriving at a climactic dyad of D and F at letter P. Here D minor is once again strongly suggested, and the dominant pedal that follows in the brass affirms this tonal return, yet, the

whole-tone material (strongly reminiscent of Sibelius) attempts to cloud this impression (Ex. 28):



Example 28: Symphony No. 1, iv

Nevertheless, Alwyn's accentuation of the dominant pedal, and the strong sense of voice-leading in the bass and treble ultimately makes the return of D seem inevitable. However, instead of moving to D, Alwyn gives us the dominant of E (surely a reference to the central tonality of the slow movement), simultaneously with a climactic restatement of Motif 3 in the brass, a combination of which throws this sense of recapitulation into magnificent relief. Moreover, one senses here, too, the composer's natural instinct for dramatic effect which he put to good use in many of his film scores at points of visual *dénouement*.

Subsiding from this climax, Alwyn's 'dance' loses momentum and the pedal point on B yields to the dominant of D (at letter R). This marks a moment of great diatonic serenity (Ex. 29), one engendered, indeed enhanced by Alwyn's masterly handling of polyphony (one wonders whether a similar coda in Vaughan Williams's Fifth Symphony, in the same key, may have been a notable precedent and influence).



Example 29: Symphony No. 1, iv

One also senses, too, that the scalic ascent to D is derived largely from the opening semitonal motive of the first movement. This contrapuntal

paragraph is also preludial to a version of motif 3 in the horns and trumpets (after letter S) in which the strong tonal properties of the motif are now manifested (i.e. A-D-B-E). Other thematic strands are introduced, namely the 'waltz', the whole-tone colouring (see the bass, ten bars before letter T), and the opening motif, which are redolent of a *quodlibet*, and give further weight to the long-expected cadence. This occurs finally at letter U, where the material now takes on the panoply of a coda in which the dance character is transformed into an ebullient apotheosis of the entire symphony. Yet, with his final statement, Alwyn chose to be more enigmatic, even quizzical, for, unexpectedly, D minor returns in the last bars with a reference to the soaring octave motif from the first movement (Motif 3), both emphasising the link to that movement and to the all-important semitonal 'cell', and, as if to lay unambiguous stress on its significance, Alwyn provides us with a semitonal ascent through F natural to F sharp (and on, up to the A above) to end the work optimistically in the *major* mode.

Overview of 1st Symphony

Alwyn's First Symphony has many fine features, whilst perhaps falling short of the outstanding impact made by first symphonies of composers such as Elgar, Walton, and Vaughan Williams. While the inner two movements are arguably the most successful in their structural cohesion and balance, it is clear that the composer experimented with the syntax of the outer movements. The sense of imbalance of the first movement, with its large-scale affirmation of the tonic may have had several intentions. First, the creation of this disproportion may have been conceived so that the concluding movements could function as a counterbalance. But it is also quite possible, given Alwyn's initial conception of creating a cycle of interlinked symphonies, that the first movement was intended as prelude, not only for the rest of the symphony but for subsequent symphonies as well. It is also debatable whether the last movement of the First Symphony provides a satisfactory conclusion to the work. In one sense, the unusual structure (which seems to employ a conflation of a ternary structure with sonata-like development), with its prevalence of D major, and its marked references to

thematic material from the first movement (and to some extent from the Scherzo and slow movement), does attempt to counterweight the open-ended nature of the first movement. And yet, thematically and structurally the finale seems slight in emphasis and argument, lending weight to the notion that more was to come - in terms of symphonic argument - in the later symphonies.

Critical reaction

The symphony was first performed at the Cheltenham Festival in 1950, by John Barbirolli and the Halle Orchestra. The Cheltenham Festival was initiated just after the war to promote new British music; in the same programme were pieces by Ireland and Delius and Vaughan Williams' Sixth Symphony. Other composers represented in this Sixth Festival included Fricker, Bax, Rubbra, Rawsthorne, and old stalwarts such as Parry and Elgar, so Alwyn was in illustrious company.

The critics were, however, not very impressed, with several, almost inevitably, alluding to Alwyn's film music as the basis for his creativity. The *Musical Times* introduced the work rather disparagingly as '....yet another new symphony which lasts 42 minutes and seems longer¹⁷', and in the same issue Mosco Carner wrote that it '...bore too many features of a film score to impress one as a serious symphony while his technique is highly expert his conception lacks an intrinsically symphonic character¹⁸'. Hugh Ottaway in the *Musical Opinion* continued on the same lines, but recognised the good qualities of the last three movements as well as the weakness of the first movement: 'Nowhere is this ('the loose style and technique of film music') more apparent than the opening movement In the remaining movements he offers us pleasing material and fine musicianship.'¹⁹. Even more damning was Donald Mitchell: 'The Alwyn symphony both disappointed and dismayedthat such commonplace stuff should have issued forth

¹⁷ W.R Anderson. *Musical Times*, October 1950.

¹⁸ Mosco Carner. *Ibid*.

¹⁹ Hugh Ottaway. *Musical Opinion*, October 1950.

from a by no means commonplace musical mind was astonishing. To say stick to film music will be considered abominable bad taste but that's my advice to Mr Alwyn ²⁰.

In hindsight, given a now genuinely accepted view that Alwyn possessed a symphonic mind, many of these criticisms were unfair and reveal a lazy and somewhat stereotypical response (but when were critics ever fair!!). There is nothing particularly cinematic about this symphony, and if Alwyn had not been widely known as a composer of film music it is doubtful whether the comparison to film music would have been mentioned. By the time of the second performance by the BBC symphony Orchestra under John Hollingsworth at the proms in 1953, some more positive opinions had emerged. In the programme note by Robin Hull he praised Alwyn's invention as '...both strong and lyrical, expressed in moods that range from tranquil to heroic, and combines potent thought with a ready accessibility... (The symphony's) tuneful romanticism is no less original than effective. ... Alwyn's symphony owes much to his expert scoring, crystal clear even in the most powerful climaxes ... Even the recapitulation of ideas is no conventional re-statement, but invariably adds new point which genuinely enlarges the argument. Each movement is, indeed, continuously developed in a way that creates fresh vistas, and produces, not merely a succession of exciting episodes, but a true sense of organic unity ²¹. This is perhaps excessively fulsome, but the review in *The Times*, however, brings us back to earth, repeating some of the earlier criticisms. Whilst recognising the work's warm ovation and appeal to the 'musical man in the street', the reviewer goes on to declaim, from his lofty perch in the cultural heights – 'To an audience of wider experience, however, this eclectic work does seem to lack positive personality and propelling tension. Its ideas are not really of symphonic import, nor is the composer able to sustain an argument so as to achieve the organic growth that we expect in a symphony - ... Alwyn is an excellent musician, but would be wiser to do what lies within his powers

²⁰ Donald Mitchell. *Musical survey*, vol 4(1), Autumn 1951.

²¹ Robin Hull. Programme notes to Henry Wood Promenade concert, 11.9.1953, pp10-11.

really well instead of over-taxing himself in this most exacting of musical fields'²². Here again we see the condescending attitude towards Alwyn as a film music composer, and one which only served to galvanize Alwyn's desire to be taken seriously as a composer of absolute music.

Whatever the rights and wrongs of the critics' opinions, the symphony has, along with most of Alwyn's music, fallen victim to the prevailing anti-romantic cultural trends of the times, and has not appeared in the concert hall after these early performances. The neglect of Alwyn's music will be discussed later in the Thesis.

²² "Alwyn's First symphony". *The Times*, 24 February, 1953.

CHAPTER 3

Symphony No.2 – One or Two Movements?

Introduction

Alwyn's Second Symphony, apparently the composer's favourite, is, at least in form, very different from the First. As Alwyn puts it – "all vestiges of classical form have been abandoned", and one main theme predominates, though there are other important motifs. It was conceived as a one-movement work, but in reality it consists of two contrasting sections with a clear break, though the two sections do share some common thematic material, and the opening theme is crucially used in the final coda. The first part is brooding, mysterious, occasionally passionate in mood, whereas the second part is more resolute and forceful. In structure it resembles, at least in outline, Nielsen's two-movement Fifth Symphony, written some 30 years earlier, but without Nielsen's wonderful life-affirming melody, and without the destructive side drum passage. Alwyn never mentions Nielsen in his writings, and it is doubtful if there was any intention to emulate the latter's unusual symphonic structure. Unlike Nielsen, Alwyn attempts to integrate the two movements into a single whole by re-introducing thematic material from the first movement into the second, and to a large extent this is successful. The combination of the wide-ranging brass theme from the first movement with the more percussive elements of the second movement is also particularly effective, as is the re-introduction of the opening theme of the first movement towards the end of the work. The two movements also complement each other in mood; the first has two quiet brooding outer sections separated by a more vigorous inner section, whereas the second has rhythmic and energetic outer sections with a more lyrical inner section. Some commentators have likened the first part to the opening and slow movements of a conventional four-movement symphony, and the second part to the Scherzo and finale, but this does not seem entirely to be Alwyn's intention, which was to write a one-movement work in two complementary parts. Unlike in the First

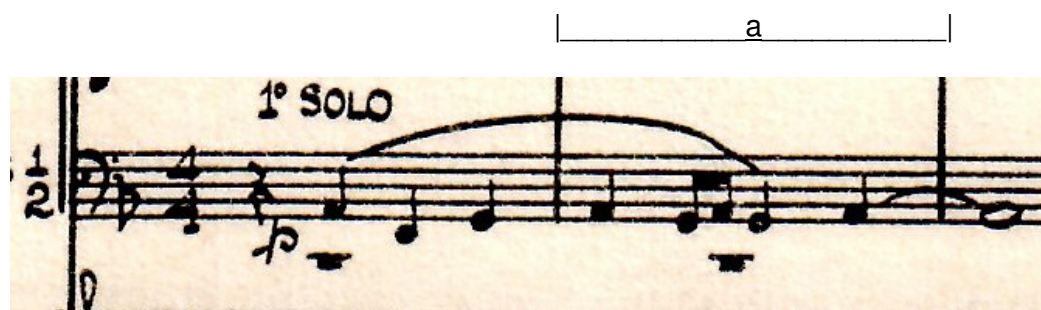
symphony, Alwyn prefers to end with a quiet epilogue rather than a full blown climax; the epilogue also has the function of defining the final destination of the symphony as F major, rather than D major which was used for the penultimate climax.

This dichotomy between F and D is introduced right at the beginning of the symphony, with the tonally ambiguous opening theme suggesting either F or D minor, and since much of the symphony is in minor keys the final sections in D major and F major seem eminently satisfying and affirmative. Although there is much tonally fluid movement between beginning and end, particularly in the second movement, this seems more purposeful than in the First Symphony, and, in general, this symphony demonstrates more maturity and self-assurance than its predecessor.

Part 1

Although in its larger form the Second Symphony differs completely from the First, the first part bears some similarities to the first movement of the First Symphony. Each movement opens in a somewhat ambiguous D minor with a brooding atmosphere, which is replicated at the end of each movement after a central more *agitato* section. In each case Alwyn uses short motifs for development, one of which is a repeated-note motif which appears in both movements; the semitone 'motif' is also prominent in each movement as a measure of cyclic 'cement'. The development in the Second Symphony is, nevertheless, more compact and convincing than that of the First, the central section with the wide ranging brass themes being especially discursive. There is less tonal digression than in the First – there are no major forays from D minor, apart from short sections in A minor and F major, but Alwyn maintains interest with greater detail in terms of contrapuntal movement, the elaboration of the part-writing and the greater intensity of chromatic harmony. The opening phrase in bassoons, answered by violins (Ex. 1), creates a quiet, brooding atmosphere not unlike that of the First Symphony, and indeed we could be in the same key, D minor. However the harmony is deliberately ambiguous; D is not clearly stated, and we could equally well be

in F. Secondly the introduction of D flat in the upper strings (as an upper auxiliary to C) sets up an interesting conflict - is this F minor? And the counterstatement by both bassoons and upper strings only serves to heighten the question. In addition, the D flat from bar 3 recurs as a pedal point in the 'cellos which itself suggests another possible channel of development.



Example 1. 2nd Symphony i, opening theme



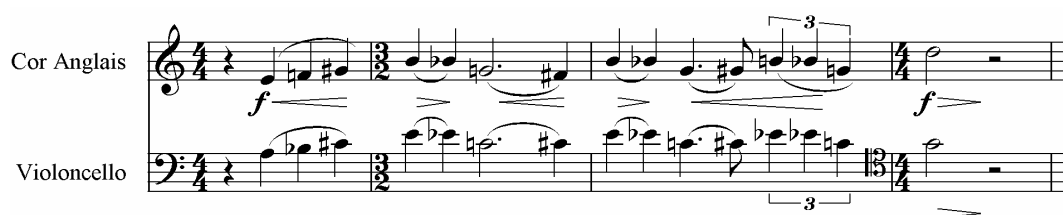
Example 1b. 2nd Symphony, i, opening theme, version 2

Alwyn proceeds to dwell on this tonal ambivalence, between F and D. At letter B, F seems more pronounced, though four bars later there is movement to the dominant of D, and then onto the dominant of A. At C Ex 1a is turned into a descending phrase played as an overlapping canon in woodwind, and further descending phrases in strings take us to E as V of A. The presence of this tonality is suggestive of a move to the dominant, the traditional home of the second subject in a sonata scheme. However, Alwyn, at this point (letter D), pulls back to D in the more agitated *piú mosso* section. The tension increases with a series of menacing brass chords in which D is

still prevalent (Ex. 2), and allusion to this tonality continues with the intonation of an important new thematic strand introduced by cor anglais and 'cellos (Ex. 3).



Example 2. 2nd Symphony i, motif 2



Example 3. 2nd Symphony i

In addition to this thematic departure, Alwyn provides us with another prominent idea, a rising phrase in the violins (Ex. 4) in canon with the 'cellos; this is soon joined by woodwind, then after a further crescendo, the brass come in at letter H with their own version of the idea, though here, significantly, the climax is underpinned not by D but by F.



Example 4. 2nd Symphony i

This reference to F is, however, only fleeting for Alwyn soon returns to the dominant of D as the music comes to a striking pause. It is as if the entire first part, rhetorically speaking, had been an introduction for what is to follow. An expected classical *Allegro* is not, however, what follows. Instead, at letter

J, there is a hushed bridge passage of 8 bars, based on the version of Ex 1b heard at letter B. In the first 4 bars the repeated-note motif descends in whole tones from A to E flat, in the trombones, with the other brass descending underneath the repeated notes - this process is then repeated in the woodwind, with the repeated-note motif going from D to A flat; these tritonal descents inevitably create an atmosphere of uncertainty and will both be important to the future musical argument.

Although D underpins the material after letter J, and the antecedent material after letter L (Ex. 5), a new agitation suggests that departure from this tonality is imminent. Indeed, just before letter M, Alwyn shifts the tonality flatwise, towards A flat, at which point a new centre of tension is unleashed.



Example 5. 2nd Symphony I, variation of opening motif

A new motif in dotted crotchets and quavers is first introduced (Ex 6) in the woodwind and continued in the strings with woodwind accompaniment.



Example 6. 2nd Symphony i

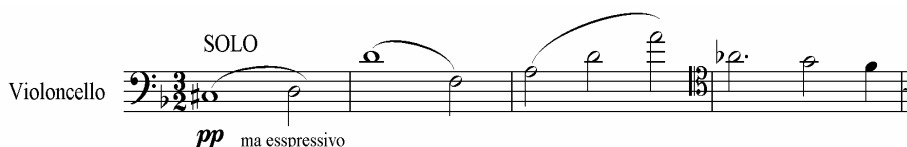
Here an extended *piú mosso* section begins, which forms the heart of the movement. At this point the lower strings provide an ostinato around D (with C# and G# appoggiaturas) underpinned by the tonic pedal in the timpani. Similarly D is reinforced by a major theme for solo horn (Ex. 7):



Example 7. 2nd Symphony I, rising phrase for solo horn

This rising phrase subsequently becomes the principal focus for an extended developmental phase in which, throughout the surrounding tonal fluidity and contrapuntal elaboration, D remains defiantly and stubbornly at the centre, both through the presence of its tonic pedal and its dominant (at letter O); it also re-appears in the second part of the symphony.

Reaching a climax of considerable force, the energy of the development is expunged, and, not for the first time in the movement, Alwyn uses a period of silence as we await the consequences of the musical discussion. In the reflective moments from brass and wind that follow, D major continues to be affirmed (immediately before letter Q), but in the '*Meno mosso*' that follows, a beautifully shaped elegiac paragraph, initiated by divided strings, Alwyn embarks on a further development of the heroic horn melody (Ex. 8), though this time as well as D, a continuing presence through its pedal points (especially in the harp), there is increasing emphasis on F, whose subtle infiltration culminates in a telling 6/4 (almost Strauss-like) at letter S, appropriately marked by Alwyn '*molto tranquillo*'.



Example 8. 2nd Symphony I, cello version of Ex 7

It might be asked at this point whether F has finally prevailed within the movement, but Alwyn's poignant statement is short-lived. After only two bars the 6/4 is 'discoloured' to a 'Tristan' diminished chord, and the promised tranquillity infected by a foreboding as any cadence into F is denied.

For the last section Alwyn reverts to the three repeated-note motif with descending notes underneath, first heard in the brass at letter J; now played quietly but firmly in brass and strings. What might initially have seemed a return to F (with the first note as an F unison), is in fact a further statement of D in a short epilogue where strands of former thematic ideas are cited as a memory. D minor, however, is not the final story.

Part 2

Part 2 provides a complete contrast in mood from Part 1, and with its dynamic and energetic opening is somewhat reminiscent of the Scherzo in the First Symphony. In fact, it was probably Alwyn's intention at this juncture of the symphony, to inject a Scherzo-like energy to the work, having not as yet experienced such a tempo in Part 1. Part 2 is in three main sections, the two energetic and agitated outer parts surrounding a more lyrical central section, and after the climax of the third section there is a quiet epilogue, forming a parallel with the short epilogue of Part 1. Rhythmic intricacy is maintained by clever use of duplet and quadruplet motifs against the basic three in a bar, and the wide ranging minim-crotchet theme (Ex 9c) lends a sense of urgency.

As one might expect at this stage, tonal fluidity is increased in notable contrast to the tonal 'stasis' of Part 1. However, as usual with Alwyn, none of the keys feel really established. Throughout the movement there is an extensive use of the tritone, an interval which engenders instability; apart from the shift from E to B flat, there is the earlier dichotomy between C# minor and G minor, between letters D and F, and the subsequent passage after letter Q, where C major is heard above a pedal G flat. Of course these tritonal shifts can also be related to the semitonal motifs which assume great importance in this movement – the dominant of A and its juxtaposition to B flat, and dominant of F to G flat. Although there is an increase in tempo after letter Q Alwyn seems reluctant to leave his lyrical theme, and at letter S this is declaimed in a passionate outburst in D major, the first time the major mode of D has been heard in the symphony. This

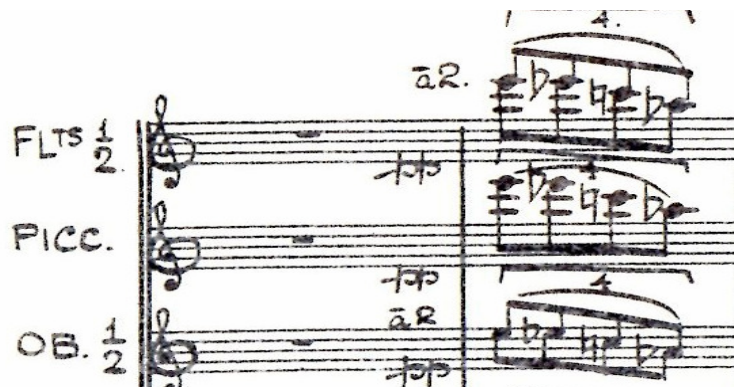
soon yields to A minor for a final statement of the descending arpeggio section of the theme at letter T, then at V with another tritone switch, to E flat minor for the re-appearance of the expansive brass theme from the first movement. This sudden appearance of material from the first movement theme is very striking, and as the tempo quickens, Alwyn combines this theme very effectively with motifs from the beginning of the second movement.

After the *tempo primo* returns at AA there is again a succession of minor keys, but after an intense passage (Ex 11 ff) it appears that the climax of the symphony has been reached in D major at letter GG, where Alwyn re-introduces the opening theme of the first movement in full orchestra. However, in a surprising twist, there is a final modulation to F major, which is maintained for the quiet and peaceful epilogue; thus the dichotomy between D and F, introduced at the beginning of Part 1, is finally resolved in favour of F.

The second part begins explosively, with short duplet motifs (in 3/4 time) in full orchestra imparting tremendous momentum; in fact with its rhythmic vitality this first section feels like a Scherzo. The harmonic movement of the duplets is from the dominant of D to F minor, once again making reference to the two quintessential tonal areas of Part 1. Having stated this strident figure, two other rhythmic elements are introduced: a minim-crotchet phrase in cellos and basses which ranges urgently over a wide range, and a descending four-quaver motif in woodwind. These three rhythmic elements (Ex 9 a, b and c) form the basis for all the first section of the second part; it is noteworthy that all three contain semitonal motifs.



Example 9a. 2nd Symphony ii, opening duplet motif (emphasising the dominant of D and F minor)



Example 9b. 2nd Symphony ii, motif 2



Example 9c. 2nd Symphony ii, motif 3 (emphasising V of D and F minor)

Ex 9c is taken up by woodwind and violins and by the time letter A is reached the extensive use of C# and Bflat suggest a return to the home key of D minor, though this is nevertheless partly undermined by references to insistent F minor triads. The wide-ranging motif (Ex 9c) continues in the strings, and at letter B there is a brief return of the duplet and 4 quaver motifs in woodwind. At this point Alwyn's material is still wedded to D minor (though with a noticeable inflection of the subdominant). However, at letter C, F minor begins to assert itself, signalled by the intrusion of the horns. This switching between two tonal planes effectively defines the expositional argument until letter E. It is also worth noting the two upward four-quaver motifs (containing three semitonal elements) repeated in violins and piccolo, against repeated thirds in woodwinds and other strings, over a pedal E (Ex 10), and after a few bars crescendo a climax is reached at letter D on the unexpected destination

of C#, emphasised by 4 bars of three repeated C#s on horns. Whereas previously C# was the leading note for D minor, now it seems to emerge as a possible new tonal centre.



Example 10. 2nd Symphony ii

Although the C#s seem to indicate a change in harmony to C# minor, subsequent crotchet and 4-quaver phrases (Ex 11a and b) still suggest G minor, and after a few bars trombones and tuba play a subdued chord of G minor 7th.



Example 11. 2nd Symphony ii

Ex 1b in strings leads to a return of the duplet motifs, leading to C# then Ex 11a in woodwind; the C#s hint at a return to D minor, but the harmony is still unstable, and at letter E Ex 1b and a in woodwind are accompanied by urgent repeated notes in brass, with the tritone F-B emphasising the harmonic instability. The dichotomy between C# minor and G minor continues, with much use of the C#-G tritone in the timpani, cellos and basses.

The insistence of the C# pedal after letter F reiterates its importance, both as the leading-note to D and its association with G as the tritone, though it is D that temporarily asserts itself after letter J. Having effectively not yet departed the domains of D and F, Alwyn, undoubtedly conscious of the need to establish a new tension, finally leaves these tonal planes at letter L with the introduction of a new thematic idea introduced by the violins. It is worth noting, however, how much the submediant, F, plays a part in the melodic components of the theme, and the semitone step from E to F continues the semitonal mindset reaffirmed at letter J (Ex. 12).



Example 12. 2nd Symphony ii

The first statement of a beautiful broad lyrical theme in violins (Ex 13), as stated above, makes reference to the dominant minor of D, A minor.

Example 12. 2nd Symphony ii, lyrical theme of central section

The insistence of F within this thematic departure is worthy of some comment. While A minor makes clear reference as the dominant of D, Alwyn nevertheless insistently builds into A minor the 'harmonic minor' F-G# step, which, enharmonically as F-A flat, provides a link to F minor. As if to

accentuate this tonal domain, and the importance of the upward semitonal *topos* within the symphony as a whole, Alwyn then shifts A minor up a semitone to B flat (the subdominant of F minor) at letter N. This has a marked effect of taking us into a quite a new tonal region, whose ethos is underpinned by the new, gently lyrical sensibility.

This other-worldliness is, nevertheless, fleeting, for at letter Q, the lyrical melody, haunted by the semitonal filigree of its accompaniment (and the souring presence of the G flat tritone), initiates the beginning of an extended dominant of F. Its resolution, moreover, is affirmed by Alwyn's marking of 'appassionato' and a gradual, urgent quickening of the tempo. The pedal C continues in cellos and basses, but trombones and tuba join in with a variation of Ex 12 and a change of key is clearly heralded – however, instead of the expected F, at letter S there is a sudden switch to D major in full orchestra. A broad phrase in trumpets involves the flat submediant (a subtle reference to the former 'other-worldliness' of B flat minor), and is derived from the first part of Ex 12 (Ex 13).



Example 13. 2nd Symphony ii

Here Alwyn's intricate use of his dual tonalities has been highly skilful. Vying for assertion, D minor ultimately held sway in Part 1. Yet, in Part 2 the former conflict was reopened, and neither key was able completely to assert itself in the first section. Fascinatingly, at the point of recapitulation, Alwyn appeared first to anticipate F (through use of dominant pedal), yet at the crux of the restatement, D *major* (and not minor) was the unexpected result, allied with a reprise, not of the opening material of Part 2, but the second subject, originally heard in the domain of A minor. Reference to this tonality is made again at letter T which marks a major climax before the music subsides. During this period of tranquillity and recapitulation, Alwyn takes the opportunity to initiate the restatement of former thematic ideas from both

sections. The noble horn theme (Ex. 7) is recalled at letter U, this time combined with the latter part of the lyrical theme from earlier in this movement (Ex 12a). With re-establishment of D minor at letter W, the reworking of the horn theme continues (though note how the version for flute refers to F major before letter X). At this juncture (letter X), thematic reprises of the first-subject material from Part 2 come thick and fast including interjections of short phrases based on motif 3 (Ex.14) in woodwind.



Example 14. 2nd Symphony ii

The dominant and tonic pedals of D (after letter Z) add to the anticipation that D is about to be unequivocally tonicised as the music gains momentum, and the reworking of thematic material becomes ever more intense and frenetic. Yet, with emphasis on subdominant harmony, clashing with these tonic-dominant components, there is an air of uncertainty clouding the sense of expectancy. This is enshrined in the trumpet theme after letter Z (Ex. 15) which is a development of a motif first heard on p53 (Ex 11) which is the precursor of an important theme later in the movement.



Example 15. 2nd Symphony ii

With the continued emphasis on the subdominant (G minor - see Ex. 16) allied the increasing rhythmical urgency of the thematic movement, the outcome seems even more uncertain, and when the ultimate recapitulation of

the opening thematic material of Part 2 takes place, neither D or F play a part, a tonal vacuum. Indeed, lacking reference to either tonal region, the impression of reprise is thrown into chaos. In order to re-establish order, Alwyn necessarily uses the opportunity to develop material which had remained undeveloped hitherto (cf. the beginning of Part 2). At letter DD, marked '*molto energico*', a greater urgency ushers in a more definite return of D minor, though references to F are strongly asserted by the return of the heroic horn theme (F - A - F, surely a reference to Brahms cryptogram '*frei aber froh*'?).



Example 16. 2nd Symphony ii

The outcome, however, of this new developmental phase is not D, nor F, but a transformation of the material from letter E of Part 1, now in new, bracing transformation reminiscent of Walton's First Symphony (Ex. 17).



Example 17. 2nd Symphony ii

Based on a seventh chord on C# (a pedal derived from the insistent references at letter A in Part 1), the orientation towards D seems more likely, and this is confirmed as the chorale gravitates towards D at letter FF. This feels like a return to the tonal centre of the symphony, but after a few bars

there is a brief excursion into F major, which will prove to be the eventual destination. However this is soon brought back to D, and at letter HH the ambiguity appears to have been settled with a full orchestra chord of D major. Now we have the original version of the symphony's opening theme, a gesture which one might expect to be a final assertion of the tonality. Yet, the interjection of the dominant of F (five after HH) presages the ultimate expunging of D as F makes its forceful entrance, first in the minor mode, and then in the major. With this statement of 'victory', Alwyn provides us with a counterpart of the epilogue in Part 1. There, of course, D minor gained the upper hand. Here, the tranquil 'other-worldliness' of the central section of Part 2 returns, now as a radiant diatonic version (with Lydian inflections). However, as if to remind us of the tonal dualism intrinsic to the symphony's central argument, veiled references to D occur with the interrupted cadence at letter LL, and with the pizzicato ostinato figure in the lower strings that bring the epilogue to a conclusion. Moreover, Alwyn is also keen to provide unifying 'memories' of F minor, which, at letter NN, throw a shadow over the closing chords for brass.

Overview and Critical Reaction

So do we consider this work to be a one-movement symphony, as Alwyn conceived it, or in two movements? There are arguments for both. Part 1 and Part 2 are strongly related in terms of common thematic material, and the thematic peroration of thematic material from Part 1 at the end of Part 2 would seem to reinforce the impression that the two movements are inextricably linked. Other structural features are worth scrutiny in this respect. As mentioned above, the tripartite arrangement of Part 1 - fast-slow-fast - is inverted in Part 2, and both movements use a tranquil epilogue as an agency of tonal finality. And, of course, crucially, the Parts 1 and 2 provide conflicting yet ultimately unifying readings of the central tonal discourse between D and F, inherent in the ambiguous nature of Alwyn's central theme established at the outset. In Part 1, D minor prevails. In Part 2, this also seems to be the case for, although F does attempt to assert itself at the point of recapitulation, D major usurps F's rightful resolution. Only at the very end

does F (major) emerge triumphantly just before the final epilogue. Yet, in Part 1, D minor's 'victory' in the epilogue failed to leave a satisfactory sense of finality; hence, the need for Part 2 as the arena of further thematic development and tonal resolution. In this sense, perhaps, Part 1 could be perceived as preludial to Part 2, an important syntax on which Alwyn relied as a foil to traditional classical principals. Even more interesting from this point of view, is Alwyn's re-arrangement or reorganisation of traditional symphonic components. Elements of the traditional symphonic movements are nevertheless present. There are undoubtedly rhetorical ingredients which relate to those traditional 'types - first movement, Scherzo, slow movement and Finale - yet these are absorbed skilfully and seamlessly into a structure which cuts across the normal expectations of symphonic behaviour. And Alwyn by no means abandons those intrinsic elements which make up a symphonic argument; indeed, exposition and recapitulation are vital, as is the symphonic, transformative part in which the well-established Brahmsian notion of 'continuing variation' plays a seminal role. Indeed, while those arguments cited above might well gravitate towards the perception of two parts, a focus on the process of variation and the prevalence of two central tonalities surely militates strongly in favour of a *one-movement* 'fantasy', a perception strengthened by the extended prevalence of D until almost the very end, when F finally asserts itself. Whatever one's final conclusion is, the compelling symphonic design of the Second Symphony, with all its inherent questions, was one with which the composer was rightly proud.

The Second Symphony was completed in October 1952, and first performed by Barbirolli and the Hallé Orchestra at the Free Trade Hall Manchester on 19 October 1953, with a second performance the following night. Unlike the First, it does not appear to have had a follow-up performance at the Proms, but it did have a second performance in Liverpool, also with the Hallé under Barbirolli. Although warmly received by the audience it was less so by the critics, who according to Alwyn were '...all at sea when faced by my symphonic innovations, neither understanding my harmonic frankness (steadfast adherence to the basic essentials of tonality and melody) or the

new freedom of my formal design'²³. The programme note by John F. Russell gave a more positive assessment, finding the symphony ...'highly individualised, not implacably modern...with no laceration of the aural facilities, entirely logical in its questing.' Noting that some may find derivations from other composers, he went on rather lyrically: '...such semblances are more apparent than real and the work remains as the strong personal impress of the mind of a man who, to paraphrase William Morris, is a "dreamer of dreams", imaginative, poetic, intent on "fluttering his light wing against the ivory gate", a man whose thoughts are tinged with beauty and aflame with emotion'²⁴.

This rather florid description no doubt pleased Alwyn, who always regarded this symphony as his favourite of the five. One of the composers with whom Alwyn was compared in a review many years later was Bax, particularly in the use of an epilogue to end the symphony – a device frequently used by the older composer²⁵. However, Alwyn assured the critic that the only symphony of Bax he had heard was the First; indeed, in all his symphonic writing, and perhaps particularly in this symphony, Alwyn showed a strong individual personality and seemed little influenced by other composers.

²³ William Alwyn. *Winged Chariot*. In: *Composing in Words*, William Alwyn, ed Andrew Palmer, Toccata Press, 2009, p33.

²⁴ John F Russell. Programme notes to concert at Manchester Free Trade Hall, 14.10.1953.

²⁵ Peter Pirie. Letter to William Alwyn, 6.12.1975 (see *The Innumerable Dance*, p 140-141).

CHAPTER 4

Symphony No.3 – 'Twelve-Note' Experiments

4.1 Introduction

Alwyn's Third Symphony was commissioned by the BBC in 1954 when he was at the height of his career. However, during the composition of the symphony, in 1955 and 1956, his personal life entered a more complicated and difficult phase. His first marriage had become increasingly unhappy and his affair with Dorothy Carwithen, as yet unknown to his wife, was growing more intense. On a professional level, disappointment occurred when he was turned down as Principal of the RAM, and, in consequence, he resigned from the Academy in March 1955. On a note of personal sadness, in September 1955 his mother died.

We know something about the turbulence of Alwyn's life during this period from the diary he kept at the time, which he christened *Ariel to Miranda*²⁶, and although in general Alwyn was reticent in writing about his musical compositions, this document does give us considerable insight into his struggles during the composition of the Third Symphony. In an undated document²⁷, apparently written before this diary, Alwyn describes his original conception of the symphony as a personal, perhaps autobiographical 'story' in four movements: 1) Introduction (birth-prenatal); 2) Scherzo variations – marriage, children; 3) Slow movement – war; 4) Epilogue – re-birth, search for melodic beauty, approach of old age, challenge to death.

In the event the symphony which was written turned out to be completely different from this description and the only thing autobiographical retained

²⁶ William Alwyn. *Ariel to Miranda*. In: *Composing in Words*, William Alwyn, ed Andrew Palmer, Toccata Press, 2009, pp 65-230.

²⁷ Adrian Wright. *The Innumerable Dance*, Boydell Press 2008, p150.

from the original plan was its turbulent nature, perhaps reflecting Alwyn's state of mind at the time. This, however, may be ultimately too facile a comparison.

The symphony was completed and performed in 1956. After the relatively conventional four-movement structure of the First Symphony and the unconventional bipartite structure of the Second, Alwyn presents us this time with a three movement work, the two energetic and turbulent outer movements contrasting intensely with a calmer, more mysterious inner Adagio. However, although this larger canvas may be straightforward, the detail of the composer's approach is by no means simple. In an apparent, belated nod to Viennese serialism, Alwyn based his thematic ideas on twelve notes; however, this is not done in a mathematical way or in a precise order, but rather, as Alwyn says, in a tonal manner. Moreover, the organisation of the twelve chromatic pitches in no way reflected the more doctrinaire organisational process of Schoenberg or Webern. Instead, Alwyn chose to divide his twelve notes into two groups; eight pitches only are used in the first movement, and the remaining four in the Adagio. In the third movement, the two groups are used in opposition, but are conflated in the symphony's final pages.

The first group of eight notes can be presented in the following manner: C, D flat, E flat, F#, G, A, B flat and B, giving the following scale:

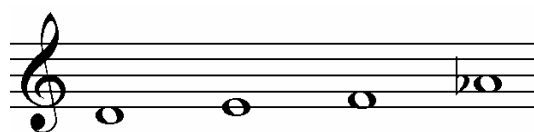


Such scales had enjoyed a precedent in earlier twentieth-century musical literature, particularly in the 'synthetic' scales of Holst and Vaughan Williams. Most interesting in Alwyn's deployment of these pitches was not so much the significance of the scalic array; rather, it was as the determinant of harmonic and melodic combinations and 'tonal' events that measured its significance. It is notable, for example, that the scale has the following characteristics:

- a) Three tonic-dominant relationships – C/G, G flat/ D flat and E flat/B flat;
- b) Phrygian elements: C/D flat, A/B flat, B/C, used both as harmonic shifts and semitonal motifs;
- c) Major/minor character – E flat/G flat/G, G flat/A/B flat and G/B flat/B (see below) (and there are other individual thirds major and minor);
- d) Minor thirds: C/E flat/G flat/A (and G/B flat/D flat) which gives rise to the character of the diminished-seventh harmony and organisation of larger spans;
- e) Two tritone relationships (which also fall nicely within the diminished seventh): C/G flat and E flat/A;
- f) Triadic possibilities: C minor, E flat minor and major, F sharp major/minor, B major. It is also worth noting that the following triads are not possible – C major, A minor, B minor, B flat major/minor, G major/minor, E major/minor, D major/minor, D flat major/minor.

Despite the fact that the 'prohibited' harmonic relationships outnumber the allowed ones, Alwyn has provided himself with an abundance of harmonic and melodic possibilities to work with, and in particular makes much use of the tritone and diminished seventh relationships to create fields of harmonic uncertainty and tension. By contrast, certain triadic formations such as B major, F# minor and E flat/major minor will prove to be of substantial significance in creating areas of tonal reference in a system that is otherwise devoid of the traditional syntax of a 'home' key.

The remaining set of 4 notes is: D, E, F and A flat:



Clearly the number of harmonic and melodic possibilities within this set is necessarily much more restricted, and whose intention, given its properties, work in opposition to those possibilities established in the outer movements:

- a) No tonic-dominants;
- b) One Phrygian element – E/F;
- c) One major third – E/Aflat=G#;
- d) Two minor thirds – D/F and F/Aflat
- e) One tritone – D/Aflat, containing one diminished 7th – D/F/Aflat;
- f) No major or minor triads.

Because of the restrictions posed by these considerable pitch limitations, Alwyn felt the need to introduce notes from the first set into the second movement, as if to underline the major distinctions between the two pitch 'domains' or 'worlds'. Significantly, in the final part of the third movement, this very feature forms part of Alwyn's larger sense of formal dialectic, as the two groups of eight and four pitches first oppose and then become more fully integrated. Contrived and complicated as this organisational scheme may seem, in a paradoxical way it leads to a symphony that, for all its reliance on dodecaphony, or at least the organisation of the twelve pitches of the chromatic scale, it is, perhaps ironically, more perceptibly diatonic, and, through its reliance on a vocabulary of more familiar harmonic configurations, is, in many ways, more easily approachable than the preceding two symphonies. Tonally, too, Alwyn indicates E flat major as the main key, with C major as a secondary key, but, as one might anticipate with Alwyn, there are numerous incursions into other keys, by which a good deal of tonal uncertainty and tension is created.

4.2 First movement: End-weighted or progressive tonality?

The final destination of the first movement is unequivocally E flat major, but this is not apparent until the conclusion, for, until then, other tonal centres, such as B major and F# minor, arguably play more conspicuous and settled roles in the progressive structure. The movement begins quietly but with an urgent military rhythm of repeated Gs, which is a prominent driving force

throughout the movement (Ex.1). Repeated note figurations have already been noted as familiar thematic fingerprint of Alwyn's style, and in this movement (perhaps reminiscent of the mechanistic rhythms of Holst's 'Mars' from *The Planets*) he takes it to extremes; after a few bars we hear whole sections of repeated quavers which are prevalent throughout the movement.

Violins 1 and 2, Viola, and Violoncello parts. The notation shows repeated eighth-note figures in a 2/2 time signature. The dynamic marking is *pp* and the tempo/mood marking is *poco a poco cresc.*

Example 1 Symphony No. 3, i

The four most important motifs are presented in the first few pages:

Motif 1 – a confident rising phrase in thirds for woodwind and brass, ending in a downward flourish (Ex. 2):

Woodwind and brass parts (Ob., C.A., Cl., Bsn., Hns., Tpts., Trbs.). The notation shows a confident rising phrase in thirds, marked *ff*.

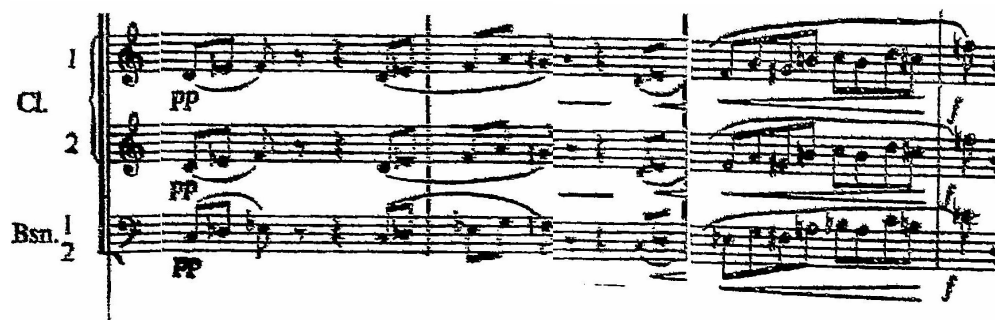
Example 2 Symphony No. 3, i Motif 1

Motif 2 – an octave leap with a drop of a semitone for horns (Ex.3):



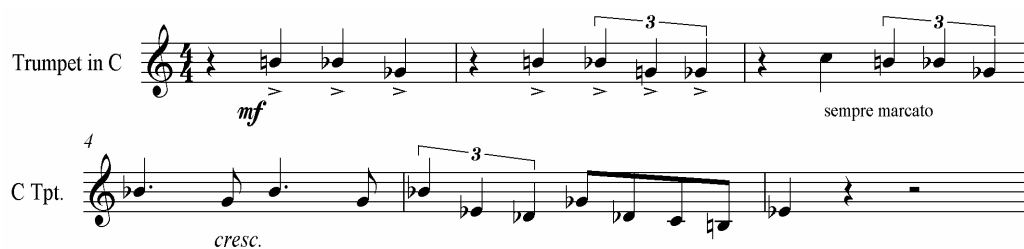
Example 3 Symphony No. 3, i Motif 2

Motif 3 – short rising quaver runs for woodwind, the first part of the motif using the rhythm of Ex.1 (Ex.4);



Example 4 Symphony No. 3, i Motif 3

Motif 4 – a falling phrase, initially of three or four crotchets for muted trumpets, which fluctuates between major and minor third intervals (hinting at E flat major but with E flat minor predominating in the first part of the movement) (Ex.5).



Example 5 Symphony No. 3, i Motif 4

The opening repeated Gs deliberately create harmonic uncertainty; they could be in any of several keys, but Motif 1 in woodwind and brass strongly defines a triadic arrangement of a B-major triad, further emphasised in the broken rising arpeggios in strings. (It is interesting that the first four notes of the eight-note scale to be heard are in the 'sharp' keys (G,B,D#,F#), perhaps presaging the separation of notes into 'sharp' and 'flat' keys in the Fourth Symphony (Ex.2)). The parallel with Holst has already been mentioned, and Alwyn's juxtaposition of G with the B major triad, seems to reinforce that connection as they become entwined. Additionally, the 'resolution' to a the C pedal at letter A almost seems to act as a quote from Holst's earlier score, though the bitonal nature of Holst's organisation is markedly different from how Alwyn proceeds. At letter A, Alwyn presents a combination of C with an E flat minor triad, marking the introduction of Motif 2, and this is followed by Motif 3 in woodwind (Ex.4), which still appears to be centred on in E flat minor. After the presentation of Motif 4 (see above), at letter B the woodwind changes to repeated chords of E flat minor and the cellos and basses have a slight variation on the repeated quavers (Ex.6).



Example 6 Symphony No. 3, i

This process of transformation and variation, albeit slight at this juncture, is nevertheless one fundamental to Alwyn's organisational principles. Alongside the constantly shifting sands of tonal polarities is the ever-changing nature of the thematic material itself, and it is this principle of 'cumulative change' that will be fundamental to the coherence of all three movements.

The tension builds and at letter C is dissipated with a sudden shift to a low A in the tuba with repeated As in cellos and basses. A new passionate phrase is introduced by violins (Ex.7), loosely based on Motif 4, while at letter D

trombones, tuba and harp slowly descend chromatically (but studiously avoiding A flat!) in semibreves from C to F#, then to E flat. The violin phrase, like all four main motifs, contains semitonal elements, perhaps an indication of the importance of the Phrygian key relationships already mentioned (and perhaps a more tangible thematic link with the First and Second Symphonies).



The image shows a musical score for two violin parts, Violin I (VI. 1) and Violin II (VI. 2). The score is in B major, 4/4 time. The top system (Violins I and II) shows a melodic line with various dynamics and articulations. The bottom system (Violins I and II) shows a more rhythmic, arpeggiated accompaniment. The score includes markings such as 'Pia unico, e poco a poco più animato', 'loco', 'unis', 'espr.', 'dim. poco a poco', 'Pochiss. a pochiss. rallentando.', and '(mf) sempre poco a poco anim.'

Example 8 Symphony No. 3, I

For the first time in the movement the harmony feels settled, and the music continues in B major in quiet serene fashion until letter K, where there is a reminder of the opening section with Motif 3 on clarinets. That the composer also marks the close of this section with a double bar is also significant. Indeed, the rhetorical nature of this blaze of B major, and ultimately the first sensation of a well-defined tonality (for all its lack of cadential resolution), begs a number of interesting questions. The clash of the G pedal with the B major harmony at the opening clearly had an importance which is only now becoming clear. The arrival of this tonality at this temporal juncture, after the fluidity of previous events, also suggests the idea of a second subject, and the settled, more lyrical nature of the material reinforces that traditional understanding of the sonata dialectic. Yet, in truth, Alwyn has adroitly avoided any form of unequivocal tonal centre that might have represented a 'first subject' which, in a most original manner, renders this statement of B major as a goal, albeit a temporary one. In so doing, Alwyn cleverly has attempted to construct a form of thematic exposition, yet, contrary to those conventional principles of sonata syntax, has shaped a process in which, instead of the traditional 'oppositional' template of two (or more) tonalities, a goal-directed scheme is paramount; more importantly, this scheme is one that will eventually presage the larger end-weighted plan of the first movement as a whole.

The negation of B is set in motion by the intervening A pedal just before letter K, at which point the rhetorical devices of the pedal points, witnessed in the opening phase of the movement, are restored. This time, however, their direction is different, perhaps suggesting a new, developmental departure. At letter L there is a further move away from B with emphatic G/B thirds in brass, xylophone and woodwind. A solo cor anglais melody (Ex. 9) soars above the quiet mechanistic rhythm.



Example 9 Symphony No. 3, i opening of development

Alwyn, at this point, places some considerable emphasis on other triadic possibilities, notably C minor (at letter N), E flat minor (at O) and (prophetically) F# minor, though a further developmental dimension is that of the major-minor fluctuation (a prominent feature within his eight-note row) which becomes more predominant, and the use of minor thirds within the diminished seventh (at Q). A crisis comes, again foreshadowing future events, with an important accentuation of the minor third F#-A. Briefly, this is expunged (at R), and subsequent harmony in the wind and strings, with the emphasis on the tritone A-E flat, suggests a further phase of fluidity. Yet, in contradistinction to this combination of pitches, is a more stable entity - a brass chorale centred on F# minor.

The appearance of this brass chorale (Ex. 10), and its association with F# minor, is important within Alwyn's larger structure. To begin with, it is the first time we have been properly introduced to the tonal polarity of F# within the movement, and the relative stability of its arrival marks it out as a significant point of repose, just as the appearance of B major had been at the end of the 'expositional' phase. Perhaps even more significant about the harmonic properties of the chorale is its entire reliance on the *three* triads, F# minor (the temporary tonic), E flat minor (powerfully reminiscent of the appearance

of that tonality in the first part) and B major, important at the opening and, as has already been mentioned, at the close of the 'exposition'.

The image shows a musical score for four brass instruments: two Trumpets in C and two Trombones/Tuba. The key signature is F# minor (three sharps: F#, C#, G#). The time signature is 8/8. The score is marked *pp legato* and *poco*. The music consists of sustained chords and moving lines. The first two measures show a full brass chord in F# minor. The third measure has a rest for the first two instruments. The fourth measure has a rest for the first instrument. The fifth measure has a rest for the first two instruments. The sixth measure has a rest for the first instrument. The seventh measure has a rest for the first two instruments. The eighth measure has a rest for the first instrument. The ninth measure has a rest for the first two instruments. The tenth measure has a rest for the first instrument. The eleventh measure has a rest for the first two instruments. The twelfth measure has a rest for the first instrument. The thirteenth measure has a rest for the first two instruments. The fourteenth measure has a rest for the first instrument. The fifteenth measure has a rest for the first two instruments. The sixteenth measure has a rest for the first instrument. The seventeenth measure has a rest for the first two instruments. The eighteenth measure has a rest for the first instrument. The nineteenth measure has a rest for the first two instruments. The twentieth measure has a rest for the first instrument. The twenty-first measure has a rest for the first two instruments. The twenty-second measure has a rest for the first instrument. The twenty-third measure has a rest for the first two instruments. The twenty-fourth measure has a rest for the first instrument. The twenty-fifth measure has a rest for the first two instruments. The twenty-sixth measure has a rest for the first instrument. The twenty-seventh measure has a rest for the first two instruments. The twenty-eighth measure has a rest for the first instrument. The twenty-ninth measure has a rest for the first two instruments. The thirtieth measure has a rest for the first instrument. The thirty-first measure has a rest for the first two instruments. The thirty-second measure has a rest for the first instrument. The thirty-third measure has a rest for the first two instruments. The thirty-fourth measure has a rest for the first instrument. The thirty-fifth measure has a rest for the first two instruments. The thirty-sixth measure has a rest for the first instrument. The thirty-seventh measure has a rest for the first two instruments. The thirty-eighth measure has a rest for the first instrument. The thirty-ninth measure has a rest for the first two instruments. The fortieth measure has a rest for the first instrument.

Example 10 Symphony No. 3, i brass chorale (F# minor)

After such a temporal emphasis on F# minor between letters S and V, Alwyn seeks to undermine the tonality's influence at letter V with the sudden intrusion of C, accompanied by a more urgent increase in tempo. The tritone distance is of course dissonant and disruptive. To this is superimposed diminished harmony (based on F# - conspicuous in the timpani after letter X)) which adds to the uncertainty of tonal direction, while thematically the composer embarks on a further development of the individual motifs. It is perhaps symbolic of the ensuing argument that, in moving to the climax just before letter Z, the trumpets blare out the two principally operative pitches - F# and E flat - before the music, critically, arrives at the dominant of E flat, two bars before letter Z. Here the tempo and tension slacken, and over a dominant pedal the lower strings (cellos and violas) introduce a thematic figure outlining the major and minor dyad on E flat-G-G flat-E flat, a figure which not only defines E flat major and minor (with a strong Lydian inflection), but with the presence of the G flat, creates a tangible link with the former polarity of F# minor. Significantly, at the appearance of this material, Alwyn makes great play in the bass and accompanying harmony of the other pitches of his eight-note group (note the powerful bass voice-leading before letter AA), barring, significantly the pitch of B, the one other tonality of real importance in this first-movement structure. Only later does B intrude (see pp. 68-70), and it does so as part of an augmented triad B-E flat-G, a sonority familiar from the exposition, and one here again recalling and

reinforcing the importance of both B major as a latent tonality and E flat major.

The nature of Alwyn's paragraph in E flat recalls his characteristic propensity for expansive statements of the tonic (as evinced by the First and Second Symphonies), and no less than 92 bars of the tonality are positively Straussian in their susceptibility for tonic reinforcement. Moreover, the composer's thematic and contrapuntal fecundity within the confines of this tonal area is impressive, especially the sonorous 'threnody' for divided strings (pp. 74-77) which almost suggests the presence of a miniature movement in its own right. Thus concluded at letter EE, the very augmented triad of B, E flat and G imposes itself again as the tempo increases, as if E flat is to be undermined, perhaps by B major. However, at letter FF, the Straussian 6/4 on E flat reasserts itself, and though B major still makes a vain attempt to destabilise E flat, with a restatement of the opening material of the exposition (and here the significance of that clash of triads becomes clear in its rationale), E flat's predominance is now beyond doubt as the movement closes '*con tutta forza*' with a perfect cadence.

In rhythmical terms, this is Alwyn's most assertive and confident first movement so far, and one that is most dependent on a self-imposed stricture of pitches. With the availability of only eight pitches, the challenge was not only to create a sound world of harmony and thematic material drawn from this circumscription, but also to invent some kind of musical dialectic in which certain tonal polarities could work in opposition to each other while, at the same time, allowing for organic development and thematic transformation. The very fact that the movement maintained the restriction of eight notes also raised the question about the function of the four remaining pitches and their role in the larger symphonic meta-structure, so that, even with the forceful conclusion of E flat at the end of the first movement, the sense of open-endedness is palpable.

4.3 Second Movement - a 'Tetraphonic' Essay

As if to equalise the twelve-note scale, Alwyn chose to restrict himself even further in the second movement with a row of those four remaining, 'unused' notes: D, E, F, and A flat. Here the possibilities are, of course, much more circumscribed intervallically, and in terms of tonal polarities, the most obviously suggested are those created by the two minor third intervals (D – F and F – A flat), giving suggestions of D minor and F minor, with neither key being at all established. Although Alwyn set himself a challenging task to invent melodic material of interest, to a certain extent this is compensated by variety of rhythm and orchestral colour, and in the middle of the movement he permits himself the luxury of introducing notes and motifs from the first movement. In his programme notes for the first performance²⁸, Hans Keller commented that the four notes of this movement act as a 'latent dominant' towards the final key of E flat achieved in the final movement; he asks us to imagine an additional B flat below or above the four notes. Indeed when B flat is introduced, together with other notes from the first movement, about half way through, this does lead to a short section in E flat minor. However the additional B flat is soon curtailed, and the predominant harmonic atmosphere in the movement is the dichotomy between D minor and F major.

The movement begins very quietly and slowly with a statement of the four notes in rising sequence on solo muted horn. Having effectively stated the seed-bed of pitches, in which the tonal centre is by no means clear, Alwyn presents an opening theme on a solo flute which fluctuates between the D and F minor dyads, the intervening E natural tantalisingly acting as both a leading-note to F and a passing note between D and F.

²⁸ Hans Keller. Programme notes to concert at Royal Festival Hall, 10.10.1956.



Example 1 Symphony No. 3, ii

At letter C the solo flute melody continues (Ex.2), with clarinets and solo violin accompaniment, and again at letter D this is taken up by the 'cellos with the strings and woodwind in the background. The rhythm of this variation is taken from that of the latter part of the first movement (letter Bb ff), and this becomes more apparent when pitches from that movement are introduced later.



Example 2 Symphony No. 3, ii

At letter E there is a sudden increase in tempo and the woodwind introduce an 'Arabian' sounding theme (Ex.3) which contains Alwyn's favourite repeated notes, and is accompanied by urgent quaver duplets in the 'cellos and basses.



Example 3 Symphony No. 3, ii

This is developed into a full orchestral version at letter F, with a military rhythm accompaniment on horns and upper strings. (Ex.4).



Example 4 Symphony No. 3, ii

A climax is reached at letter G, with emphatic repeated A flats in brass and a counterpoint answer in strings and woodwind (Ex.5).



Example 5 Symphony No. 3, ii

At letter H, Alwyn provides us with a reprise of his four-note group. Although there is a distinct sense of F as the persisting polarity, the Dorian element of D is studiously present throughout, an effect which militates against the resolution and unequivocation of F minor at this point.

With the quizzical close of this paragraph, Alwyn begins to introduce pitches from the first movement's eight-note group, while continuing to make reference to the flute theme of the opening. With the prevalence of B flats, however, a new tonal interpretation, as Keller suggested, of the dominant of E flat comes into focus, and the horn material after letter J also makes distinct reference to E flat major/minor (Ex. 6).



Example 6 Symphony No. 3, ii

This interruption of 'foreign' pitches is, however, short-lived, for, at letter M, Alwyn returns to his four-note pitch domain, and this time builds the self-developing thematic material to a declamatory climax at letter O (Ex. 7) in which the stridently wide intervals lead to a further intrusion of B flat in the bass (p. 104).



Example 7 Symphony No. 3, ii

Here this sense of a functional dominant of E flat is palpable, though with the cadence to E flat at letter Q, Alwyn studiously avoids any sense of traditional resolution to E flat harmony. Instead, at this important rhetorical juncture, the opening flute theme is recapitulated in the cor anglais, initially accompanied by two further foreign pitches of B and C# (perhaps a spectre of things to come?). To the melancholy hue of the cor anglais is added a counterpoint on the first violins who ultimately carry the extended theme to its hushed conclusion, leaving the questionable impression of an F minor that is by no means final.

The self-imposed restriction to four notes produces an inevitable limitation of melody and a certain, deliberate monotony; and although Alwyn tries to mitigate this with variations of orchestral colour and tempo, the success of the movement, indeed, the experiment, is questionable. In particular the 'Arabian' theme seems contrived and rather trite, though it is explored thoroughly in various orchestral colours. In fact this theme probably comes from a film score which Alwyn was writing at the time – *The Black Tent*, directed by Brian Desmond Hurst. Filmed in Libya, it tells the story of the love of an English Army Captain for the daughter of an Arab Sheikh, and the four notes of the symphonic movement are used for several motifs in the film (28). As for the introduction of the 'foreign' pitches, it seems that Alwyn used this only as a restrictive means - first to introduce an element of opposition to the otherwise stereotypical backdrop of the four pitches, and second as a means of referring to the central tonality of E flat.

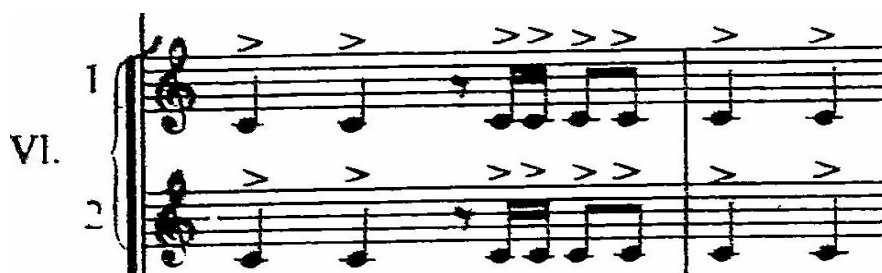
4.4 Third Movement - Culmination and Fusion

In the third movement Alwyn continues in the same vein as the first movement, with a return to the militaristic rhythms of repeated notes. Initially Alwyn restricts himself to the eight notes established used in the fabric of the first movement. There follows a quieter passage based on the four-note set of the second movement before the vigorous rhythms return with the deployment of all twelve notes. A lyrical passage interrupts the flow just before the end, but the symphony ends with a final flourish of repeated notes in the affirmed 'tonic' key of E flat major.

The movement begins even more urgently and energetically than the first movement, and, after a typical Alwyn wide-ranging motif (Ex.1), Alwyn takes up the familiar repeated-note military rhythm which will dominate much of the movement (Ex.2).



Example 1 Symphony No. 3, iii



Example 2 Symphony No. 3, iii

The initial statement of Ex. 1 firmly states a tonic and dominant of C, which, after three bars of descending chromatic scales, is affirmed by the mechanistic rhythm of repeated Cs (a polarity strongly hinted at, if somewhat more obliquely, in the opening bars of the first movement). This pedal point of C is persistent - until letter F, though Alwyn soon attempts to undermine its dominance with brief forays from the pedal point (Ex. 3), and a chord sequence in the wind and brass which, significantly, marks out important referential harmonies of F#, G (as V of C) and E flat.



Example 3 Symphony No. 3, iii

A version after letter C, in the trumpets, makes a particular point of emphasising the dyad G flat-B flat(Ex.4), a tritone's distance from C, a

sonority which Alwyn then proceeds to reinforce during the accumulation of dissonance at letter D.



Example 4 Symphony No. 3, iii

C, or more specifically a synthetic Phrygian version of C minor, prevails at letter F (Ex. 5), where Alwyn takes the original theme (see Ex. 1) and creates a vigorous fugato:



Example 5 Symphony No. 3, iii

In creating this fugal matrix of invertible counterpoint, Alwyn makes his first fugal statement in C, but at letter G, the fugal subject is transformed into a version in E flat minor/major (note the function of F# and G), and this fugal entry naturally reminds us of the former significance of E flat from the first movement. Cleverly, too, as interpolations between the fugal entries, Alwyn introduces a fanfare-like idea (three bars before G), which gradually asserts itself as an important thematic component. This fluid, rhythmically dynamic

paragraph continues to highlight C and E flat until letter J, when, in a passage of Walton-esque passion, the presence of an extended pedal becomes ever more prominent and serves to undermine the C (Phrygian) minor figure in the brass. Indeed, at letter L, the pedal forms part of a more prolonged indeterminate diminished seventh harmony (a harmony familiar to us, once again, from the first movement).

At this juncture, the character of the music changes. The fugal demeanour is replaced by a toccata-like figure, a style-form which aptly supports the lively and quasi-improvisatory disposition of the musical treatment. The significance of this section is that Alwyn proceeds to treat those important referential harmonies mentioned above - B major and F# minor - as a transition to E flat at letter O (and the dotted rhythms, such as before N, do much to remind us of the first movement). Here, with the massive dynamic of *fff*, Alwyn reaches E flat, and with an orchestral dexterity he had learned from the cinema screen, and, one suspects from Walton's striking film scores, the horns and cellos 'scream' out a new thematic strand (Ex. 6) in E flat (with the strong Lydian inflection we recall from the conclusion of the first movement).



to the dynamism of the preceding fugue and toccata, yet, given the emphasis Alwyn places on the fluidity of his material, the sense of forward motion *to* a goal is very much at the forefront of our experience, and Alwyn is in no mood to weaken this sense of constant change. Hence, at letter Q, we return to the rhythmical restlessness of the movement's opening, but now arrested by a sudden shift from familiar pitches. This catastrophe indeed ushers in the four-note set of the second movement (see two bars before Q), and, for the moment, the expulsion of the eight-note set. However, in what feels suddenly alien in atmosphere, the music gathers pace, and somewhat ironically, introduces the four-note 'row' of the second movement (in the horns and trombones), *not* with their original pitches, but using notes from *both* sets - e.g. B-C#-D-F. Indeed, this statement heralds a section at letter S where the harmonic background itself is derived from *both* sets (note for example how the string finger *tremolo* 'pedal' is equally derived from both). At the same time, however, Alwyn's union of the two sets is construed as a tension (centred on D) between the rising figure of D-E-F-A flat and the falling figure D-C#-B. This leads, at letter T, to the eviction of the four-note set, and the statement of a 'seventh' harmony (B-D#-F#-A) which becomes more lush as Alwyn plays on the sonority with the additional major and minor ninths (see letter U).

The seventh (indeed, ninth) harmony on B is in fact a functional augmented harmony which resolves at letter V at a major climax (again *fff*). Such a move from B to B flat, already hinted as being thematically important in the 'secondary' lyrical phase of the movement, now assumes a significant melodic and tonal presence in the movement's conclusion. This can be observed in the bass figure (p. 158) as the persistent upper-neighbour to B flat while the brass fanfares reiterate those important referential harmonies of E flat, B and F#. Most importantly of all, at letter W, the emphasis of the pregnant B flat gains force as the harmony embraces the all important pitches from the four-note set to strengthen the functional role of B flat as dominant-seventh harmony. Resolution of E flat is then held impressively in abeyance at letter X by the simultaneous statements of a C flat triad and the

4.5 Summary of Third Movement

In this movement Alwyn seems to want to emphasise a sense of mechanistic severity. The military rhythms on repeated notes persist almost throughout the movement; almost but not quite to the point of monotony. The effect is somewhat reminiscent of Holst's 'Mars', though perhaps less relentless as Alwyn does allow for the intrusion of more lyrical interludes. The first of these, with just the four notes of the second movement, comes as a surprise after the lengthy first section avoiding these notes, and is particularly effective as a point of opposition. The second, more expansive lyrical section arrives late in the movement, and leads one to expect a quiet ending, which is quite common with Alwyn's finales, but in the end he decides to revert to the military rhythm, which is arguably more effective as an ending.

The similarity of the conclusions of the first and third movements, in retrospect, calls to mind other similarities, notably the extended use that Alwyn makes of prolonged tonicisation, quite evidently a form of gesture he loved. There are also structural similarities at work. Given the negation of a sonata dialectic by the sense of 'progressive tonality' that Alwyn essays in both movements, there are strong parallels in the way the composer attempts to create a veiled reference to the impression of a 'second subject' in his use of B major in the first movement and his use of G flat (and E flat) in the last movement. However, in order to furnish his finale with a greater sense of unity, the sense of recapitulation, both for the third movement and the work as a whole, is marked by the amalgamation of the two pitch sets exclusive to the first and second movements, one of which is ingeniously symbolised (as Keller states) in the coagulation of a dominant seventh harmony of E flat. The definition of the ensuing perfect cadence is subsequently experienced as being truly final in an environment where the traditional understanding of tonal dialectics has been absent.

4.6. Overview and Critical Reaction

The symphony received its first performance at the Royal Festival Hall in October 1956 by the BBC Symphony Orchestra under Sir Thomas Beecham, as Barbirolli was indisposed. Apparently Beecham said – ‘They tell me I can’t conduct modern music. Well this should learn them!’²⁹. Clearly this symphony was thought of as a ‘modern’ piece, and the critic Charles Reid described it as ‘An angry new symphony... the music’s mood most of the time is brassy, brisk, brusque – even angry, in a winsome way’³⁰. Although he did not approve of the calm, lyrical passage towards the end of the final movement, he said... ‘I have never known a new symphony, except Vaughan Williams’ No. 8, go by so quickly, and on the whole, so entertainingly.’ Another, unnamed, critic also found the lyrical section at the end out of place; ‘The orchestral writing is often grandiose and dramatic, but beneath this the substance of the music is sober and closely packed. The work’s chief weakness seemed to lie in a certain inconsistency of style, which tacked a rich and nostalgic coda in the manner of Arnold Bax onto a movement in a much more austere harmonic language’³¹.

In terms of performances the Third has fared rather better than its predecessors; it was featured in the proms in 1957, then after a gap of fifteen years, at the Royal Festival Hall again, and after another gap of 21 years, at the Barbican in 1993. In a review of the first performance, *The Times* found the symphony... ‘positive in feeling and cogent in argument.... Moods of mystery and apprehension in the first movement, a rather wan but sinister questioning in the slow movement, and in the finale turbulence once more, leading to action which exorcises the ghost. At this point the music settles down to a calm and quiet cadence which makes a psychologically right conclusion to the whole symphony. But for structural reasons Alwyn adds

²⁹ William Alwyn. *Ariel to Miranda*. In: *Composing in Words*, William Alwyn, ed Andrew Palmer, Toccata Press, 2009, pp 230.

³⁰ Adrian Wright. *The Innumerable Dance*, Boydell Press 2008, p164 (see also Ref.12).

³¹ *Ibid.*, p164.

half a dozen bars of condensed and rhythmic allusion to what has gone before. It is a point for debate whether the symphony would be better without them.³² Percy Cater, in *The Daily Mail*, found the harsh mood a bit too overwhelming: 'Alwyn does not stint himself in brass and percussion or in what one takes to be the martial mood. The symphony is deficient in contrast, with a sombre cast, strife and contest in the opening movement and finale, quieter solemnity in between. If Alwyn could have been less stern for a while, his symphony would have gained in effect.'³³

As mentioned already this could be related to Alwyn's unsettled personal life at the time, though in his book *'Composing in Words'* Alwyn, masquerading as 'Dr Crotch' warns us that trying to link music to extraneous events and feelings can be misleading³⁴. A better insight can be gleaned from his diary *Ariel to Miranda* – 'I have been working all day on the sketches of the last movement of my symphony – very violent and experimental – and find myself longing to reach the point where the music can be expressive and beautiful. The whole justification for composing is to create something which I believe to be beautiful'³⁵. And some two months later: 'I am still not happy over the closing sections of the symphony; it does not give me quite the feeling of the spacious tranquillity of a homecoming'³⁶. Clearly Alwyn felt the need to write a symphony of greater intellectual rigour, and to a certain extent this militated against his natural instinct for lyricism and beauty. An interesting parallel with Vaughan Williams' Fourth Symphony, which appeared over 20 years earlier, pertains here. Its harshness and dissonance was greeted with surprise and some dismay by listeners and critics after the 'Pastoral' Third; some critics saw influences from Schoenberg and Berg, whose works had recently been premiered in London, whilst others sought extra-musical references to the increasingly unstable state of Europe at the

³² Alwyn's Third symphony". *The Times*, 24 October, 1956.

³³ Percy Cater. *Daily Mail*, 11.10.1956.

³⁴ William Alwyn. The Musical Opinions of Doctor Crotch. In: *Composing in Words*, William Alwyn, ed Andrew Palmer, Toccata Press, 2009, p 251.

³⁵ William Alwyn. *Ariel to Miranda*. In: *Composing in Words*, William Alwyn, ed Andrew Palmer, Toccata Press, 2009, p 73.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p 130.

time. Vaughan Williams repudiated such suggestions, and said: 'All I know is that it is what I wanted to do at the time. I wrote it not as a definite picture of anything external.... But simply because it occurred to me like this.. a thing comes – or it doesn't.'³⁷.

Nonetheless Alwyn, having set out to write in this vein, struggled, particularly with the last movement, where he felt the need to include a lengthy lyrical section towards the end. Although this was criticised by reviewers, the present author feels that it is entirely appropriate as a confluence of those essential pitch sets in the first two movements where the arrival of E flat emphasises the destination key of the work, and after this calm period of reflection the final burst of military rhythm provides a satisfactory conclusion.

³⁷ Ralph Vaughan Williams. Sleeve notes, recording of 4th Symphony, EMI 1985.

CHAPTER 5

Symphony No.4 – Apotheosis

5.1 Preamble

Although by now Alwyn makes no mention of his original “grand design” of four symphonies as parts of one large whole, the Fourth Symphony does, in many ways, impart the feeling of a finale to the set of four, an impression cemented by the use of many ideas borrowed from the previous three symphonies and a majestic and beautiful slow last movement which provides a worthy end to the cycle.

As in the Third Symphony Alwyn gives us three movements, but the mood and design is very different; instead of a slow second movement, we have a Scherzo in the middle, flanked by two slow movements, although the first movement does have an Allegro middle section. Alwyn's flirtation with dodecaphony in the Third Symphony plays some part in the organisational process of the Fourth in that he chose to create an oppositional system which divided up the twelve semitones of the chromatic scale into two groups. Again one group consisted of eight pitches, the other of four. However, unlike the Third Symphony's deliberate mutual exclusion in the first and second movements, these two sets are heard together from the very first bars, and the harmonic conflict is much less violent and more subtle than in the previous symphony. A further dimension, too, is the interesting sense of tonal progression throughout the work which incorporates the process of 'progressive tonality' from the Third Symphony within each individual movement, a dimension which also combines with a scheme linking the movements through a series of rising major thirds. The first movement begins with a section in F# (minor) and ends in B flat major; the second movement begins in D major and ends with a cadence into F#; the third movement takes up this F# but ends emphatically in B flat major.

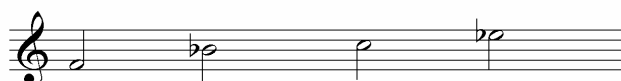
5.2 The First Movement: A Rhetorical Inversion

After the more complex through-composed and fantasy-like outer movements of the Third Symphony, the fundamental structure of the first movement is disarmingly simple. A ternary design - ABA - is defined by a lengthy slow introduction, setting out the central thematic motifs, which yields to an allegro middle section. This in turn leads to a *maestoso* climax in the original tempo, after which the music gradually dies away and ends quietly in B flat major. The interesting meta-structural feature, however, is that this symphony seeks rhetorically to invert the fast-slow-fast arrangement of the Third Symphony by having slow movements flanking a central *Scherzo*.

In terms of pitch arrangement, Alwyn drew on the system already essayed in the Third Symphony, i.e. of creating two sets of mutually exclusive pitches, one a set of eight (referred to here as the 'sharp' set' given the sharp keys suggested by the set of pitches), the other a set of four (referred to here as 'flat', given the self-evident flat keys in contradistinction to the sharp keys of the larger set), from which ensues a struggle for dominance. However, as mentioned above, these two groups vie for position simultaneously throughout the work, rather than being restricted to individual movements. The pitches of the 'sharp' set are arranged thus:



The set of four:



The sharp set is presented in the woodwind, the flat set, in longer note values, in the lower strings. The rest of the movement will continue the dichotomy between sharp and flat keys, with the sharp keys predominating in

the first section and in the *Allegro*, but the flat keys gradually winning out towards the final section in B flat major.

As in the Third Symphony, Alwyn's careful choice in his 'sharp' set of pitches is suggestive of particular categories of triad - F# minor, C# minor, E minor and major (the latter with the potential of a D added as a dominant seventh) , B minor, A major, G major and D major, which are functionally (and closely) inter-related, and the numerous dyads are also useful tools for tonal suggestion. In addition, Alwyn (again, like those processes in the Third Symphony) saw opportunities for modal inflection (Phrygian, Lydian etc). For the 'flat' set, although there is no triad to speak of, the four notes provide useful points of tonal reference; B flat has its dominant, F; F has its dominant C, and E flat has its dominant B flat. Crucially, however, this set, defining B flat major, lacks the 'resolutive' pitch of D (central to the 'sharp' set, and, as we shall see, central to Alwyn's tonal argument throughout the symphony), a *lacuna* which will prove so conclusive in the final stages of the work. At the opening these two sets are heard 'bitonally', Alwyn effectively giving us an exposition of the pitch sets as well as important thematic cells:

Example 1 Symphony No. 4, i

The culmination, at letter A, in the woodwind, strings and horns settles on a F#/C# open fifth, with succeeding groups of 3 notes in lower strings implying

F# minor, though this key is by no means settled, with subsequent groups of 3 from the set of 4 “flat” keys in the woodwind. Also at A the timpani introduce the “sarabande” rhythm (Ex.2) which will permeate much of the movement.



Example 2 Symphony No. 4, i

This statement of (Phrygian) F# as a significant polarity is important, for at this point the impression given is that the 'sharp' side has gained 'pole' position over the flat side, an event bolstered by the sequential material at letter B where the sarabande rhythm is intoned, now in 3/2 time (and F# minor), with interjections from brass. This sequential tendency will prove important as a thematic and motivic *topos* throughout the symphony. F# continues to assert itself through its dominant, but after a few bars a solo horn introduces notes from the “flat” keys, continuing the tonal uncertainty (Ex.3).



Example 3 Symphony 4, i

The sequential *topos* continues at letter C as the material from the opening is restated. Again Alwyn places his greatest emphasis on F# as the prevailing polarity (not least because of the strong sense of a perfect cadence (four bars before letter D), but the water continues to be 'muddied' by the intrusion of the 'flat' set whose presence is firmly imposed after the cessation of the F# timpani pedal (before letter E).

At letter E, a new phase of the movement begins, presenting the initial thematic cell in the horns and bassoons. The '*ff*' statement by full orchestra combines notes from both pitch sets, before the 'flat' set emerges. Here, it would seem, B flat attempts to gain the upper hand (Ex. 4), but, at letter F, rather like the workings of kaleidoscope, the plane of colours shifts to the 'sharp' set. A scenario for the conflict between the two sets is therefore put in place. F# once again (as an inverted pedal), is brought to the fore and the 'flat' side expunged.

The image displays a musical score for Example 4, Symphony No. 4, i. The score is written for several instruments, including Horns (F), Cello, Bass, and other instruments. The Horns (F) staff has a first ending bracket. The Cello and Bass staves have pizzicato markings. The score includes dynamic markings like 'p' and 'cresc.'.

Example 4 Symphony No. 4, i

All this time, Alwyn has been building up additional tension to the conflict by the quickening of tempo. Furthermore, F# minor begins to be supplanted by the feeling of a Lydian D major (at letter G) which carries headlong into the Allegro. So far, then, Alwyn has given an unusual thematic exposition based on the rising and falling three-note cells established at the opening, accompanied by a sense of tonal dualism where neither set has gained the ascendancy. Rhetorically, however, the sense of a slow introduction

accelerating into an *Allegro* recalls something more Romantic in its syntax and gesture.

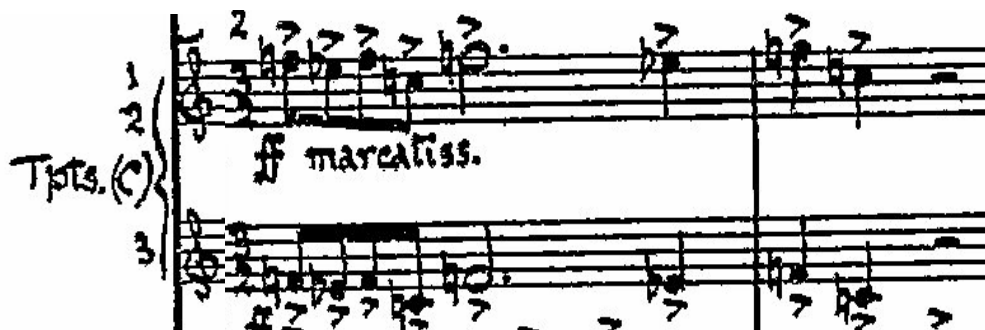
With the beginning of the *Allegro*, Alwyn presents a double pedal of D and F#, essentially combining the two suggested polarities of the 'introduction' or first section. Of course, we cannot be sure of either key, and the sense of uncertainty is heightened by a further intrusion of the 'flat' set in the violins and brass. Nevertheless D major does begin to crystallise with the continuation of the angular thematic strands of the first and second violins between letters H and J. This gives rise to one of Alwyn's now favoured processes - that of an extended self-developing, almost fantasy-like theme which gathers pace in range and intensity as it develops (Ex. 5). Significantly, this process of development also involves the 'infecting' of the 'sharp' side by the 'flat' side, another distinct *topos* of the symphony. Indeed, this is clearly another type of dialectical system with which Alwyn was attempting to experiment. One further point of significance, too, is the allusion in this angular theme to that of the First Symphony's outer movements.



Example 5 Symphony No. 4,

At letter K Alwyn presents further development of earlier material and he begins to move further afield in terms of his choice of triads generated by the eight-note pitch set. At K there is a strong suggestion of C# minor in the violins, with a bitonal presence of G major (and its dominant D), but this yields eventually to what seems like a dominant seventh of A (E-G#-B-D) at letter L, giving the impression that resolution, to A, is pending. Not surprisingly, however, this strong tonal pointer is disrupted by the increasingly persistent imposition of the 'flat' set after letter M (Ex. 6), and by

letter N, at a point of considerable dissonance, the flat and sharp sides are heard a third apart simultaneously '*con tutta forza*'.



Example 6 Symphony No. 4, i

Alwyn's sense of fantasy is increased in the *Allegro* section by a greater sense of episodic disjunction, a technique more common to Neo-Classicism. This is evident at letter N, where a more Sibelian section, marked '*meno mosso*' hangs precariously between a Lydian D major (at letter O) and the C# dominant of F# that precedes it. This more tranquil statement is rather brutally interrupted by a new thematic idea in the wind (Ex. 7), again, creating a backdrop of notable dissonance in its bitonality.

Example 7 Symphony No. 4, i

This rather strident material on the flat side is preludial, however, to a new martial episode at letter S (redolent of epic film music such as *Ben Hur*) in which not only does Alwyn present another new thematic reworking of the opening material (replete with martial rhythms) but also the key now is unequivocally B flat major, the tonal area strongly favoured by the four-pitch set. However, it should be noted that at no point does Alwyn ever give us an *unequivocal* triad of B flat (in other words, the pitch of D is missing), and

indeed throughout the concluding bars of this movement he studiously avoids any confirmation of the full triad.

The presence of B flat is of course accentuated by the strong sense of tonic-dominant movement in the bass, and Alwyn's emphasis on B flat is extensive. And, moreover, the presence of the angular thematic material in the horns at letter T reminds us more affirmatively of the First Symphony. Clearly, at this stage, Alwyn was conscious of some kind of cyclic relationship between this, his latest symphonic utterance, and his first point of symphonic departure in 1949. Only at letter U does the territory of B flat begin to be subverted by pitches from the sharp set, a presence which can be felt most powerfully in the scalic ascent in the bass to letter V. Accompanying this bass ascent, Alwyn recapitulates a transformed version of his angular theme introduced at the outset of the *Allegro*, but now stated here as a closing, somewhat solemn thematic event accompanied by an almost modal ostinato in the wind (combining the two pitch sets with a prominent flattened seventh). At the closing point of this thematic statement, Alwyn leaves us in no doubt about the prevailing tonal polarity of B flat and the 'winning out' (at least for the moment) of the flat set of pitches. Nevertheless, as a fleeting threnody, strands of the eight-note pitch set (marked 'piangevole') occur, and the final harmonic point of rest is B flat supporting an upper collection of pitches from the sharp set. (Note how D is present in this collection, but the impression of B flat is subverted.) The argument is, quite obviously, not over, and only the rest of the symphony can bring resolution to this open-ended statement.

5.3 The Scherzo as Central Focus

The basic structure of this movement is relatively uncomplicated, the outer scherzando sections being interrupted by a lyrical *meno mosso* trio section. In its rhythmic vitality and energy it resembles the *Scherzo* from the First Symphony, but it is more tightly knit and the *meno mosso* less expansive. Although this *Scherzo* may be outwardly similar in many ways to the tripartite structure of the one in the First Symphony, it is undoubtedly tauter and more

tonally sophisticated than its predecessor. The persistent downward scale in the main theme could easily become repetitive but Alwyn avoids this by means of subtle metrical variations and thematic modifications. The use of the swinging fifths motif in brass (rather Walton-esque), initially as an adjunct to the downward scale motif then later integrated with it, is particularly effective. The *meno mosso* section provides a lyrical contrast and the transition back to the reprise of the Scherzo material is effected with subtlety and legerdemain.

Tonally Alwyn continues to draw on his dialectical system of 'sharp' and 'flat' keys in a contrasting way, but as in the first movement these opposing tonal poles are integrated amongst the thematic paragraphs rather than being organised in larger, mutually exclusive sections. It is of some significance that the first Scherzo section sets out in an unequivocal D major (the very pitch Alwyn set out to avoid as a resolution of B flat at the end of the previous movement); nevertheless, the conflicting brass outbursts with 'flat' pitches in the middle of the descending scales already establish the continuance of the 'battle' between the two pitch groups. A strong link between the *Scherzo* and the opening of the first movement is established at letter B with the *topos* of the descending sequential scales, though at this point Alwyn adds the dissonant ingredient of the four 'flat' pitches. This idea will be heard again in the finale. In deference to a more classical sense of thematic and tonal organisation, Alwyn presents two distinct thematic departures. The first consists, as mentioned above of the scalar descending figure - to all intents and purposes seven of the eight pitches of the 'sharp' set with 'flat' interjections (Ex. 1). In his review of the Lyrita recording³⁸ (38) Trevor Hold likens this theme to 'change-ringing' of church bells, but in its rhythmic persistence it is also reminiscent of one of Bruckner's *scherzos*, particularly that from the Eighth Symphony.

³⁸ Trevor Hold. Sleeve notes, recording of 1st symphony, Lyrita, 1975



Example 1 Symphony No. 4, ii

Much of the extended pedal material, and the dotted rhythms derive from the first movement, though here the rhythmic dynamism is perhaps reminiscent of Walton's vibrant rhythmical world. A second thematic area, however, is offered with the arrival of F# (again presented initially as a pedal) and the pizzicato ostinato in lower strings. Placed concurrently with this tonal polarity is a further, and more substantial version of the opening idea of the *Scherzo* with a new consequent phrase (Ex. 2), based in A major - though the subtle link between these two areas - the dyad of A and C# - is deftly stressed by the interjection of the violins.



Example 2 Symphony No. 4, ii

With these interlocking polarities, Alwyn also elusively adds further colour with three of the four 'flat' notes in the trombones. A major ultimately asserts itself as the dominant polarity in this thematic paragraph, effectively accentuating the more traditional classical dialectic of this movement of tonic and dominant keys, though, as with all Alwyn's material in this symphony, a tension remains with constant bitonal presence of the four 'flat' pitches, a presence which is notable after letter J in the bass. Here, B flat major - as we are already aware from the first movement - tugs at A major as a potentially destabilising influence.

As has already become a pattern of behaviour from the first movement - that of disjunction - the 'sharp' plane of D and A majors is abruptly subverted by the introduction of the 'flat' plane at letter N. Initially the sense of disjunction is vivid, but in time, Alwyn restores the pedal material (letter P) on E flat, though this is, of course, now on the 'flat' plane and the dissonant conflict is provided by the 'sharp' plane. Significantly, however, this switch to the flat plane is infiltrated by pitches from the sharp, a happening that ultimately foreshadows the 'process' of what takes place in the forthcoming Trio at letter R.

The Trio, marked '*meno mosso*' is well differentiated from the *Scherzo* in tempo and mood. Its two contrapuntal strands also symbolise a further significant feature and that is the persistent fluctuation between bars of (a) sharp and flat pitches and (b) triple and quadruple metre (Ex. 3).



Example 3 Symphony No. 4, ii

Furthermore, Alwyn adroitly juxtaposes his pitches so that C# and B (from the sharp plane) are located within the fourth of E flat and B flat, a sound which subsequently informs the thematic nature of this new shifting 'kaleidoscopic' material. This group of notes is significant in terms of Alwyn's climax just before letter W. Here we arrive at a consonant point of rest on a triad of B major, a rationalisation of the tetrachord of A# (written as B flat)-B-C#-D# (written as E flat) which itself defines dyads of V and I of B major.

At this point the self-developing theme of the Trio subsides and yields to an important strategic memory of the bitonal pitch 'seed bed' from the opening of the symphony at letter X. Having provided effectively a reinforcement of

those all-important generative elements, Alwyn effects his reprise of the *Scherzo*, though this process is done gradually.

At letter Y, the *Scherzo*'s opening material is recalled, though its presentation leaves us uncertain of its direction. Interlocking dyads of A and C# with A and F, effectively symbolises the ongoing dualism of the pitch sets. Both also suggest dominants of D (the opening tonality) and B flat. C# ultimately gains the upper hand, and as the leading-note of D, finally gives way to a full recapitulation in D at letter AA. Events thereafter largely replicate those of the *Scherzo*, though with an attractive rescoring of the A major theme for bucolic solo 'fiddle' (see letter CC). At the climax of this thematic paragraph (at letter KK), the scalar idea in A major is strongly emphasised, though, as in the first *Scherzo* section, it is abruptly counteracted by the interjection of an F major triad (at letter LL). Though this still continues to link the two pitch sets (A from the sharp set, F and C from the flat), this baldly triadic assertion clearly directs us more towards the flat plane, and indeed towards B flat, suggesting perhaps that this is to be the goal of the movement. However, F proves to be the starting point of a further thematic development of the secondary material (with particular stress on the rising scale), and Alwyn also wryly includes snippets of the bitonal opening of the symphony (see p. 108). The presence of two dominant pedals - A and F (see p. 110) - adds weight to this bitonal uncertainty - which one is to prevail? And, at letter P, B flat, like the end of the first movement, appears to be that final goal. Moreover, Alwyn takes delight from accentuating this tonality through its extension. Nevertheless, in the knowledge of the bitonal precedent Alwyn has established, the sharp plane soon appears (letter QQ) to undermine any sense of stability - in the form of a thematic memory of the Trio material. Nevertheless it still seems as though B flat will prevail. Yet, deploying that other essential feature of this movement (indeed, of the symphony so far) - disjunction - Alwyn switches his pitch planes around at letter RR. However, instead of crucially returning to D major, Alwyn's goal is F# major, a scale, though consonant, which incorporates notes from the sharp plane (F#, C#, B and G#) and flat plane (E flat and B flat - respelt as D# and A#).

As if to make a point of the role of disjunction in this movement, Alwyn then proceeds to give us one further unexpected shift - this time to G at letter TT, a move which emulates the semitonal movement upwards from C# to D at the beginning of the *Scherzo's* reprise. This is answered by two microcosmic events which sum up the movement: a six-note chord in the brass which features the triad of F# minor and three notes from the flat plane (B flat, E flat and F), and a final forceful reiteration of the opening of the Trio's thematic idea, again featuring the fluctuation of sharp and flat planes. More final, moreover, is the perfect cadence into F# which is unequivocally outlined by the timpani and the outer melodic extremities of the final thematic statement - C# to F#.

5.4 Third Movement - Finale and Peroration

The finale of the symphony is a lyrical slow movement into which Alwyn pours all his passionate romanticism. It has a valedictory feel reminiscent of Mahler, such as one might find in the last movement of his Ninth Symphony. The movement is the apotheosis of the work and also, perhaps, of the four symphonies which the composer originally thought of as a 'grand design'. It is one of the most lyrical movements that Alwyn wrote but also one of the most sophisticated thematically and tonally. Although it is in three main sections the structure is more complex than the tripartite design of the first movement. The lyrical first section gradually increases in intensity, and leads to a reprise of the scherzando section of the second movement, albeit in altered form. After this subsides, there is a reprise of the lyrical mood of the first part, but the final section carries the main weight of the movement and is more overtly one of development than recapitulation, for Alwyn persists in developing his thematic material to the passionate sweep of his final climax.

The concluding F#s of the *Scherzo* are carried forward to the third movement which begins with an *Adagio* and a deeply reflective character. The falling figure from F# to D and a second from C# to A are suggestive of D major, a tonality we have already heard at some length in the central *Scherzo*. The material presented is also a further statement of the 'seed bed' from the

opening of the first movement and other reiterations throughout the first two movements. This confirmed by the bitonal statement of the flat plane in the lower pizzicato strings (Ex. 1). Alwyn's goal this time, however, is not D or A, or even F#, but G, a most unexpected area at letter A. Marked '*Il canto sereno ma espressivo*', the composer gives us a long extended song melody (Ex. 2) , though its angularity reminds us potently of the First Symphony where a similar melodic demeanour was presented. This is undoubtedly one of Alwyn's most moving and emotional statements in all the four symphonies - a threnody which 'outdoes' all other threnody-like passages - and it is a statement which is largely diatonic save for the Lydian inflection of the C#. Yet, even within this seemingly spontaneous outpouring of sentiment, Alwyn is deeply calculating in the construction of this lyrical material. Four bars after letter B, it is significant that the melodic ascent initially culminates with an F# minor chord - a polarity which has been so important throughout the work - and as the melody climbs further to its peak, it is to a first inversion of a B flat triad, where the intrusion of the 'flat' plane is subtly deployed as a moment of great poignancy. Similarly, at the functional perfect cadence at letter C, the bitter-sweet nature of the dominant minor ninth (with F, E flat, C, and B flat) again highlights the confluence of both pitch planes.

A repeat of the theme is given to the solo flute, but any further extension is curtailed by a more developmental phase in which the descending sequential 'motto' idea (heard of course in both the first movement and Scherzo) is used. Of importance here is the fact Alwyn begins to allow his two pitch sets to intermingle more freely. This is certainly the case here, while the subsequent 'fugato' like section at letter H differentiates the sets once again (note the 'flat' plane in the trumpet - Ex. 4) before steadily combining as the rising melody builds to a climax.



Example 1 Symphony No. 4, iii



Example 2 Symphony No. 4, iii



Example 3 Symphony No. 4, iii



Example 4 Symphony No. 4, iii

The climax of this 'fantasy', at letter K, is a further reiteration of the 'motto' which has a subtle sequential melodic structure with an uncanny Elgarian sound to it (Ex.5).



Example 5 Symphony No. 4, iii

At this point, Alwyn has returned to his 'sharp' plane, but at letter L, with the cyclic introduction of the *Scherzo* material, the 'flat' plane returns with a vengeance in the brass (note also the continuation of the sequential 'motto'). All this activity, open-ended development and conflict amounts to the need for some form of resolution, and Alwyn provides this at letter N with the arrival of F#. This deeply punctuative moment serves as a moment of stabilisation. F#, as we know, has been an important polarity throughout the symphony. Here, however, it also functions as the culmination of the *Scherzo* material, now as a modal F# scale, replete with the dissonant intrusions of the 'flat' plane.

At this juncture Alwyn's summation of the music so far is a martial statement in the brass which presents harmonies first from both pitch sets, phrasing first to the flat plane, and then to the sharp (before letter O). This passage is ultimately predicated on the falling nature of the bass, derived from the 'motto'. At letter P this falling bass merges into the *Scherzo* material once again, this time based on the polarity of D, replete, of course, with the dissonant, bitonal presence of the 'flat' plane in strings and solo horn.

This dissonance now becomes a feature on which Alwyn skilfully plays, for after letter K, he effects his thematic recapitulation of the languid opening

theme of the *Adagio*, but this time not in G but in F sharp major, here spelt as G flat major. It is as if finally F sharp as a persistent tonality within Alwyn's tonal meta-structure has now found its supreme goal and stability; furthermore, in the form of the *major* mode with Lydian inflection, rather than the *minor*, it is able to subsume the entire 'flat' plane, thereby bringing together both pitch sets as a statement of unity.

This glowing statement of great profundity within the symphony may be final as regards the fate of F# as a polarity, but it is not Alwyn's final word. At letter T a new departure sets out from D minor, a tonality of much significance in the First and Second Symphonies, and it of course relates closely to the significance of D in this work, notably in the *Scherzo*. Moreover, D *minor*, like Alwyn's introduction of F# major, now embraces *both* pitch sets (D from the sharp plane, F from the flat plane). As part of this new phase, Alwyn introduces a strident thematic idea derived in part from the descending third idea (see Ex. 1 and 6); what is more, it significantly also reiterates the very same pitches (C#-B-A).



Example 6 Symphony No. 4, iii

The urgency created by the increase of tempo, dynamic and the repetitions of the descending third cell now also give us a much stronger impression that Alwyn is moving to his final conclusion. At first, the tonality is strongly anchored to D minor, but eventually the pedal moves up by steps (see pp. 144-5) until, at letter U, we arrive at one of Alwyn's favoured Straussian 6/4 chords, emulating very much the same manner of arrival as was experienced in the outer movements of the First Symphony. At this point of greatest structural magnitude, the 'flat' plane, and more precisely, the key of B flat returns triumphant and Alwyn's reinforcement of the sense of apotheosis (a

familiar feature in all his symphonies) is signalled not only by the recapitulation of the movement's opening melody in the heroic unison horns, but also by B flat's embracing of the 'sharp' plane. This is effected not only through the subsuming of the 'sharp' pitch set, but also by one last major reference to the element of disjunction experienced throughout the symphony. This is symbolised by the sudden interjections of an F# minor triad on two occasions before B flat finally brings the work 'home'. And, Alwyn does this with great aplomb in the final bars by presenting in the lower brass and woodwind the *unresolved* four-note 'flat' pitch set (B flat-C-E flat and F), a gesture which leaves open the way for the final, thrilling *resolved* chord of B flat as the final gesture of the symphony and one which represents the final welding together of the two pitch sets.

5.5 Critical Reaction

The Fourth Symphony was premiered by the Hallé Orchestra under Sir John Barbirolli at the Proms in August 1959, with a subsequent performance by the CBSO at Leeds Town Hall. I have not been able to trace any contemporary reviews, but from notes on subsequent recordings and later reviews there is a general feeling that this is Alwyn's finest symphony. Certainly it has fared better than his previous symphonies in terms of performances – following the two initial performances it has been played at the Guildhall Northampton in 1973, the University of Kentucky in 1988, and most recently in 2009 at St Giles Cripplegate by the Bloomsbury Chamber Orchestra.

In a review of Alwyn's recording of the symphony in 1975³⁹, *Gramophone* noted that: '...the style remains firmly rooted in the inter-war years when Alwyn first discovered his composing voice... Alwyn's language is conservative, then, by today's standards – most often reminiscent of Walton's, though at moments one catches a glimpse of Bax, Sibelius, even Elgar and Mahler, hovering behind. What gives it symphonic fibre is a

³⁹ *Gramophone*, May 1975.

closely-worked and inventive use of note-rows – not in the serial sense, of course, but rather as melodic/harmonic cells, capable of transformation into many different but perceptibly related forms.' The review of this and other symphonies, however, ends in a qualification: 'Just at times, I confess, the rhetoric seems to me a little over-blown, particularly in the fourth symphony.....' In another review of the same recording, Peter Pirie thought Alwyn's harmonic language 'less advanced than that of Elgar' and went on: 'The worst that can be said against Alwyn is that he sounds like an ultra-conservative Bax without the tunes'⁴⁰. This seems wide of the mark, considering the sophisticated and subtle ways in which Alwyn both contrasts and integrates his two sets of sharp and flat keynotes. However Pirie found the symphony 'impressive, in spite of the fact that it is quite traditional', and has particular praise for the scherzo – 'a magnificently imaginative and thrilling piece of music, its brassy clamour and savage stride is most impressive.' He also recognises Alwyn's progress as a symphonic composer: 'Unlike the usual Cheltenham composer, Alwyn made a symphonic progress, the Fourth clearly telling of a long journey since the cycle of four symphonies had been begun'.

5.6 Conclusion

The somewhat lukewarm response to Alwyn's Fourth Symphony is perhaps more revealing of the general lack of intelligent and perspicacious musical journalism that was present at the time. An obsession with 'advanced' language, a synonym largely intended to berate Alwyn's adherence to tonality, was common at the time, and Pirie's criticisms of Alwyn were also aimed at Benjamin Britten. Such criticisms now seem rather empty, and the understanding of Alwyn's careful, not to say highly schematic processes of composition was largely ignored. And to suggest that Alwyn lacked melodic invention seems bewildering and hard to justify, given that, in this symphony, he is perhaps at his *most* inventive.

⁴⁰ Peter Pirie. *Records and Recording*, May 1975, p26.

Yet, the most telling factor of the Fourth Symphony surely has to be the extraordinary intricacy which the composer exercised in creating a successful musical dialectic. After the initial essays of the First and Second Symphonies, Alwyn's Third Symphony proved critical for the composition of his Fourth in both the meta-structural and detailed structural levels. The Third Symphony, as we have seen, experimented with a three-movement design - fast-slow-fast, which Alwyn then adopted for his Fourth. However, in doing so, he elected to 'invert' the tempi, so that slow movements flank a central, focal Scherzo. The Third Symphony also experimented with the division of the twelve chromatic pitches - into one of eight and one of four - in which the two groups largely occupied 'separate' existences, only coming together at critical structural moments. A further dimension, of course, was the one of progressive tonality, in which the outer movements of the Third both moved towards the outcome of E flat at their conclusions, the last movement involving a conflation of both pitch sets as a gesture of unity.

In the Fourth Symphony, Alwyn adopted the same process of pitch division - eight and four - but, as we have witnessed, his method of opposition and conflation is altogether more sophisticated. Throughout the symphony both pitch sets work as oppositional tools before coming together at the end of the last movement in the most convincing of perorations, and this is effected principally because the more carefully considered choice of pitches gave the composer more possibilities both for melodic invention and tonal exploration. This particularly true of the significance of F# minor and major, D major and B flat whose defining *major* mode only becomes apparent at the very end of the symphony. These ingenious and highly telling facets of Alwyn's work were clearly ignored by the critical fraternity, who, distracted by the tonal dimension of the work, failed to appreciate the legerdemain of the internal organisation and experimental coherence.

CHAPTER 6

Symphony No.5 – An Afterthought

6.1 Preamble

Fourteen years had elapsed between the performance of the 4th symphony in 1959 and the appearance of the Fifth, and during this time there had been a considerable change in both Alwyn's personal life and his compositional output. In April 1961 Alwyn left his wife and took up residence in a cottage in Blythburgh, Suffolk with Dorothy Carwithen, his mistress of many years (who he always called Mary). Although this led to personal happiness, his isolation in the Suffolk countryside meant that he would never again be at the centre of musical life in London, and this contributed to the subsequent neglect of his music.

During his time at Blythburgh Alwyn led the life of a romantic artist, writing poetry and taking up painting. Musically he devoted most of his time to the composition of his two operas, *Juan, or the Libertine*, and *Miss Julie*, though he also wrote occasional orchestral pieces – by this time his work as a film composer had ceased. The origin of the Fifth Symphony was a commission by the Norwich and Norfolk Triennial Festival for an overture for the Festival in 1973. Alwyn started the composition in the autumn of 1972, but at some stage it became more extended and grew into what Alwyn first called a symphonic overture, and later his Fifth Symphony.

The artistic inspiration for the work was an elegy by Thomas Browne (1605-1682) a famous citizen of Norwich who was a physician, philosopher, botanist and archaeologist. The elegy was entitled *Hydriotaphia: Urn Burial, or a Discourse of the Sepulchral Urns lately found in Norfolk*. This might seem a somewhat obscure work to be a source for a symphony, but clearly this and other works of Thomas Browne had been an inspiration to Alwyn

during his life⁴¹. A quote from the elegy is introduced at the beginning of each section, but it is by no means a programmatic work, and can be enjoyed as a piece of pure music by anyone unacquainted with Browne's work.

In his notes to the Naxos recording of the symphony⁴², Alwyn comments that his attitude to symphonic writing had radically changed since the Fourth Symphony – his aim now was to 'compress the full four movements of a full length symphony into a single movement work with four brief but contrasted sections'. In this he largely succeeded: the whole work lasts no more than fifteen minutes, and although there are short breaks between the individual sections, the motto heard in the first section acts as a unifying theme, and, unlike the Second Symphony (where, as mentioned earlier can be heard as one part *or* two), this really does give the unequivocal sense of a one-movement work. Alwyn's harmonic language, too, is different from that of the previous symphonies, assuming a much more contemporary apparel, and where the sense of tonal stability is not settled until the end of the final section, where there is a resolution in E major. The Scherzo in particular seems almost atonal, a harmonic instability achieved by an avoidance of conventional triads and pedal points, at least in the first three movements, and frequent use of tritone and semitone intervals and motifs. Nevertheless, what we witness in Alwyn's compressed structure are the same disciplines and strictures that he exercised more liberally in his earlier four symphonies.

6.2 First Section

'These dead bones have rested under the drums and tramlings of three conquests.'

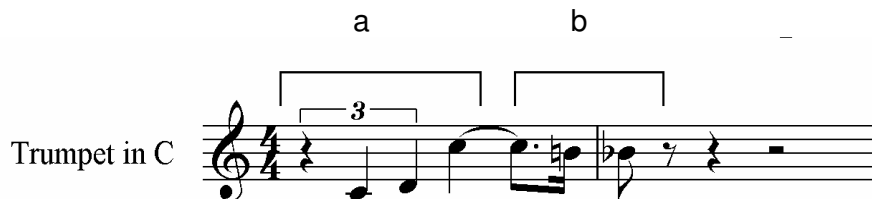
The first section acts as an exposition and initial exploration of the motto theme which forms the basis of the whole symphony. It has a restless, disturbed, slightly eerie feel, with no settled harmony. It opens with a haze of sound, somewhat reminiscent of Martinu's late symphonies (especially the

⁴¹ Adrian Wright. *The Innumerable Dance*, Boydell Press 2008, p221.

⁴² William Alwyn. Sleeve notes, recording of 5th Symphony, Lyrita 2005.

Sixth Symphony), and after 2 bars of demisemiquavers in strings and woodwind there is a crescendo to a chord in full orchestra, followed by one of Alwyn's typical military rhythms on timpani. Alwyn's choice of pitches is carefully selected. Based on E, he presents a dissonant indeterminate five-note chord of E-F-A flat-B-C, pitches that will prove seminal to the 'composing out' of his four short, interlinked movements. As is evident from the pitch group, certain tonal possibilities are suggested. Two full triads are possible - E major and F minor (together with its leading-note); C, as a polarity is also possible with the dyad of C and E and the leading-note B. Furthermore, the E-F and B-C semitones are also an important generative ingredient as is the F-B tritone (as is evident from the Scherzo), and the motif E-F-A flat.

Soon the first half of the motto theme (Ex.1a) is heard on clarinets and muted trumpets – this consists of three notes with an interval of a major second followed by an upward leap – initially the leap is of seventh, but on subsequent occasions the interval is varied, indeed the immediate response from bassoons and horns includes a tritone (Ex.2) and this latter sequence of notes will also play an important part in this first section; it will also, like the five-note chord, be generative of future tonal events.. The motto theme is then extended by trumpets with a 'suffix' of a chromatic two-note descent (Ex.1b).



Example 1 Symphony No. 5



Example 2 Symphony No. 5

The full motto theme is reminiscent of the wide ranging horn theme in the first movement of the First Symphony (motif 3), with its leap of a seventh followed by a chromatic tail. Against the background of the five-note chord, the motto theme is developed as the tension increases, and the chromatic tail is extended with a chromatic descent in trombones against semiquaver ostinati in strings and woodwind, from A flat leading to a loud unison C in full orchestra at Figure 1, followed by the military rhythm on timpani. The military rhythm dies away and the tritone motif of Ex.2 is reintroduced in strings, now in a brisk rhythm and ending on C (Ex.3), followed by a hesitant chromatic commentary in woodwind and muted trumpets, giving a slightly unearthly feel. The motif of Ex.3 gives the movement much of its rhythmic drive.



Example 3 Symphony No. 5

The robust statement of C at Fig. 1 marks the beginning of a new departure - the first movement proper, which is heavily based on the material of Ex. 3 (derived of course from Ex. 2). The tritone also plays an important part in moving from passing polarity to passing polarity. For example, at Fig. 2 Alwyn moves from C to F#, a first tritone shift, and then from B to F at Fig. 3. But underlying these tritone moves is the presence of the five-note chord which is evident at Fig. 6, and the importance of C as the central polarity is established at Fig. 7, an event also accentuated by the recapitulation of Ex. 2 (as antecedent) and a version of Ex. 1, the motto (as consequent) at Fig. 8 (see Ex. 4).



Example 4 Symphony No. 5

agitato section marks a second phase of the movement as the sense of C minor yields to a pedal of D and a statement of the motto theme, but this is short-lived as Alwyn restates the dominant of C vigorously at 'ff' four bars before Fig. 16. This marks a return to the tranquil opening and an elegiac cadenza for a solo violin, again with the movement left unresolved.

6.4 Third Section

'Simplicity flies away, and iniquity comes at long strides upon us.'

The quiet mood is shattered by a violent outburst from woodwind and brass, heralding the start of the scherzo movement, which has something of the diabolic about it. The whole movement is full of tremendous restless energy and brings out Alwyn's orchestration skills to the full. There is no trio section and only a slight pause in momentum before the final onrush towards a violent climax. There are few moments of thematic definition and no settled tonality – indeed, much of this paragraph is deliberately atonal.

The F# of the solo violin then becomes the 'seed' for the next phase of tonal events. A strident F# chord is heralded by the brass which sets an important tritone 'dissonance' with the C polarity of the previous two movements, and it is this interval which is most prevalent in this movement. After the initial outburst dies down rising phrases in woodwind and strings lead to another version of the motto theme, blasted out by trumpets then trombones (Ex.7), followed by a deep F#. This event serves to emphasise the significance of these two pitch areas.

Example 7 Symphony No. 5

The Scherzo then becomes a battle of supremacy between F# and C which can be noted after Fig. 20, and the conflict continues a semitone lower, between F and B after Fig. 21 as Alwyn develops the motto theme in a new phase of transformations. This indeterminate harmonic 'background' underpins the musical argument between Figs. 21 and 26 in which C minor attempts to interject but signally fails to assert itself (e.g. Fig. 25) and it is not until Fig. 28 that the crisis comes. Here Alwyn crucially gives us an extended pedal of E, whose 'major' implication is supported by the A flat above (though without the B to confirm the triad), pitches that return us to the very opening of the work. At this juncture, the motto theme also recurs throughout the brass and wind in a volley of statements before the movement, almost enigmatically, returns to C with a firm reminder of the F# tritone.

6.5 Fourth Section

'Man is a noble animal, splendid in ashes, and pompous in the grave.'

After a long pause the final Cs of section three in basses and timpani lead straight into the fourth section without a break. It is in the form of a funeral cortège, with a long expressive melody, the *first* of its kind in the symphony, leading to a maestoso final section in which the motto theme is heard for the last time. The symphony closes in a mood of serenity, but with a reminder of previous conflicts.

The opening recreates the atmosphere of the second movement, with tubular bells intoning a slow three-note ostinato which is derived from the E-F-A flat pitches of the five-note chord of the opening (Ex. 8a), and a motif already extensively used in the Scherzo. Alwyn cleverly sets this three-note ostinato in 4/4, avoiding metric monotony, and as the flutes and violas join in the bells move up to play a version of the first half of the motto theme in its tritone form (see Ex. 2), the tritone interval going downwards from B flat to E instead of upwards (Ex. 8b).



Example 8 Symphony No. 5

This ostinato is then defined tonally by the progression of V-I in F; in other words, C, so prevalent in the previous three movements is now used as a dominant to a *new* key, F, and this continues to support the introduction of a version of the motto theme at Figure 31 in violins and woodwind, in which the chromatic tail is altered and extended to form an expressive melody (Ex. 9).



Example 9 Symphony No. 5

This melody ultimately represents the major thematic culmination of all four movements, and in its self-developing, voluptuous bars (for here, Alwyn jettisons the demonic and severe tones of the previous movements for something much more overtly Romantic) it not only concentrates both departure and reprise in concentrated form, but also an important stage in the 'composing out' of the five-note pitch set introduced at the opening. What is even more telling, however, about the outcome of this passage in F is the unexpected Straussian 6/4 (a gesture we have been so used to in the earlier symphonies!) at Fig. 33 which heralds yet another significant move to a new tonal centre, E, not as yet experienced in the symphony. Moreover, Alwyn uses this climactic confluence as the opportunity to present his motto theme in a transformed inversion where the 'tail' now heroically rises rather falls. We also know from Alwyn's past symphonic essays that he had a predilection for extended tonicisation at the conclusion; this is mirrored here where his thematic material continues to be reworked but at the same time is gradually distilled in a radiant coda of E major.

Horn in F

Trombone

Example 10 Symphony No. 5

What is even more telling, however, is Alwyn's final gesture after Fig. 36. Here the bass descends semitonally from F# to E, a progression which reinforces the already well established *topos* of semitonal motives in the five-note chord. But even more telling is the final 'cadence' from F to E in the bass, for here the two 'conflicting' triads defined by the five-note chord are brought finally into focus as F yields to E from where the symphony embarked. And, as if to inject a memory of past events, the E major triad of the last page of the score is coloured by throbbing C's in the harp and horns, reminding of us of the once important polarity of C.

6.6 Conclusion and Critical Response

The Fifth Symphony was duly premiered by the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra under Philip Ledger at the Norfolk and Norwich Festival in October 1973, though, as it was the opening work the Festival Committee insisted it be called a *Symphonic Overture*. The review in the local *Eastern Daily Press* was rather muted: 'It is immediately acceptable music based on the four-movement symphony and providing a familiar atmosphere. I do not think that Mr Alwyn meant to say anything new, it is his manner of saying it that holds the attention'⁴³. However since then the symphony has received increasing critical acclaim, and has become the most frequently performed of the five. A second performance in Norwich, at St Andrew's Church, by the BBC Symphony Orchestra under Gennadi Rozhdestvensky in April 1980 was immediately followed by its London debut at the Royal Festival Hall with the RPO under the same conductor. Further London performances were at the Proms in 1982 with the BBC concert Orchestra under Nicholas Cleobury,

⁴³ *Eastern Daily Press*, 29.10.1973.

and at the Barbican in 1993 with the LSO under Richard Hickox; it was also performed in Northampton in 1981 and Huddersfield in 1996.

One reason for the increased interest in this symphony might well have been the appearance of the Lyrita recordings of the symphonies, conducted by the composer, in the mid 1970s. Another could have been the conciseness of the piece, and the fact that its harmonic language, less overtly romantic and more 'contemporary' than in the previous four, was more in keeping with the trends of the time. William Mann, in *The Times* wrote: 'It is Alwyn's shortest, most concentrated symphony, I think his most eloquent'⁴⁴, and in a letter to Alwyn, Eric Fenby said 'No work for the past decade has impressed me more than your glorious symphony'⁴⁵. Reserving judgment, *The Daily Telegraph* considered it 'an unexpectedly cryptic work...certainly it is severely objective up to the final elegiac and nostalgic coda. For all its beauty, though, the general tone is expansive, in the sense that it seems unashamedly tonal in origin to bear an inherent lyrical weight which must be given time to make an impact'⁴⁶(46). The last sentence seems to misinterpret the overall tone of the symphony, and could almost have been written about the Fourth. A more realistic and positive appraisal was given by Calum MacDonald in *The Listener* in 1993: '...the terse and sometimes harsh No. 5....gives most striking evidence of this composer's ability to renew himself and his language even as he entered old age....the single movement teems with new timbral invention and punchy, uncomplacent sounds, though the maestoso climax of its final funereal march strongly asserts Alwyn's continuing commitment to the English symphonic tradition.'⁴⁷.

Significantly, then, Alwyn's Fifth generated more approbation for the composer than his previous cycle of four symphonies. That this had

⁴⁴ William Mann. *The Times*, 17.4.1980.

⁴⁵ Eric Fenby. Letter to William Alwyn, 16.4.1980.

⁴⁶ *Daily Telegraph*, 18.4.1980.

⁴⁷ Calum Mac Donald. *Listener*, 14.11.1985.

happened after more negative critical reception of his former efforts is perhaps suggestive of the times. In the 1950s the public were increasingly less inclined to large-scale symphonic essays (even if they were prepared to accept Vaughan Williams' last three), so that the more concentrated thinking of Alwyn's Fifth, appealing to a critical fraternity more geared to musical pith and more condensed, even microcosmic creativity was likely to attract a more receptive audience. What seems to have eluded the critics, however, was that Alwyn's approach, for all its distillation, ultimately fell back on a strong sense of tradition. In using the four-movement model, Alwyn returned to the font of thinking which inspired his First Symphony, for all the traditional building blocks are there - first-movement *Allegro*, slow movement, *Scherzo* and Finale. And, an examination, as we have seen, of those unconventional experiments with internal form in the first four symphonies reveal that Alwyn was able to use this font of experience with great fertility in the concentrated schemes of the Fifth Symphony's individual, open-ended movements. Indeed, the progressive tonality used with such invention in both the Third and Fourth Symphonies is deployed with magnificent ingenuity, and just as both the earlier symphonies had been based on a rigorous organisation of pitches, so too is the Fifth Symphony with its own particular dialectic of C, F and E.

CHAPTER 7

Conclusion and Context

7.1 Influences

When Alwyn first decided to write more 'serious' music, including symphonies, he set himself to study the scores of composers he most admired: Liszt, Wagner, Debussy, Puccini, Stravinsky, Scriabin and Elgar. As noted in the preface to this thesis, this list contains only one true symphonist. From Liszt he first derived the notion of the 'transformation of themes' approach to symphonic structure, which he used to considerable effect in all the symphonies, but he eschewed Liszt's overblown romanticism. Of the other composers on the list, it is difficult to construe any major direct influences in the symphonies except, perhaps, Elgar, and even then such an influence emerges only in certain passages. There are also echoes of another British symphonist, Walton, in the Scherzo of the First Symphony and in the second part of the Second Symphony, Ex.11.

Of the other composers on Alwyn's list perhaps occasionally there are aspects of Scriabin in his 'ecstatic' mode in Alwyn's brassy climaxes, e.g. the perorations towards the end of the first and fourth movements of the First Symphony, before the epilogue in the final section of the Second, and at the end of the last movement of the Fourth. Otherwise, however, there are no obvious definitive influences of the composers on Alwyn's list, and the fact that these examples are so few and far between is an indication and testament to his individuality as a composer.

It is perhaps with the Third and Fifth symphonies that one may infer an indirect influence of Schoenberg and the Second Viennese School. The Third Symphony was Alwyn's reaction to serialism, but he used the twelve-tone approach in his own very individualistic way, quite different from the serial doctrine of Schoenberg's system, cleaving as did others (such as

Britten) to tonality and to dialectical systems derived from tonality. It seemed that Alwyn felt the need to experiment with this approach, and having got it out of his system, for the Fourth Symphony he reverted to his full romantic style, with a Mahlerian slow last movement which is a suitable apotheosis to the cycle of four. The Fifth Symphony, however does reveal more tangible elements of the Second Viennese school in its extreme compression of thought and its harmonic instability, particularly in the almost atonal Scherzo section. This is highlighted by Paul Serotsky in his programme notes to a relatively recent performance at Huddersfield town Hall in 1996⁴⁸, in which he purposefully traces influences of Schoenberg, Berg and Webern.

In an interesting letter in 1980⁴⁹, Sir Cecil Parrott, an expert on Czech music, also compares Alwyn with Martinu. 'Your use of the orchestra is immensely richer than his and seems to belong to another age ... what you have in common with Martinu is that powerful feeling for rhythm which dominates both your and his work.' He describes the Scherzo of the Fourth Symphony '...as carefree as only Dvořák can be', and also detects in Alwyn's music occasional Moussorgsky-like touches (in its intuitive approach to harmony) as well as a link with Bruckner (in the approach to structure and gesture). Some of these supposed influences seem rather fanciful if extended too far – although it is possible point to occasional examples, eg the Scherzo of the Fourth Symphony and that of Bruckner's Eighth, but these are arguably coincidental similarities rather than profound influences.

Nonetheless, Alwyn does admit to having been influenced by Czech music, particularly that of Dvořák, Smetana and Janáček in his string quartets and he acknowledges Dvořák's influence in the Scherzo of the Fourth Symphony⁵⁰. In general, however, Alwyn's studies of other composers' works

⁴⁸ Paul Serotsky. Programme notes for concert at Huddersfield Town Hall, 19.10.1996.

⁴⁹ Cecil Parrott. Letter to William Alwyn, 8.4.1980.

⁵⁰ William Alwyn. My Debt to Czech Music. In: *Composing in Words*, William Alwyn, ed Andrew Palmer, Toccata Press, 2009, p 345.

were absorbed into what became a recognisable style of his own, and his symphonies demonstrate a mature individuality.

7.2 The Symphonies in the Context of Alwyn's Other Music

Alwyn started composing at the age of 8 and continued almost till the end of his life, so his output was enormous. He started composing film music in the mid 1930s, and altogether wrote music for over 200 films. Although the critics were rather derogatory about this aspect of Alwyn's work, particularly in their reviews of the 1st symphony, there is no doubt that the film commissions, in all their variety, helped to hone Alwyn's craft in orchestration and invention. Nonetheless, when it came to writing the symphonies there was hardly any direct borrowing from his film music, almost the only exception being the 'Arabian' theme in the slow movement of the Third.

Although, in 1939, Alwyn disowned all his previous compositions as being unworthy of a serious composer, he was perhaps being rather severe on himself. He wrote thirteen string quartets before this date, and, although some of them can be regarded as juvenilia, several, notably the four produced between 1932 and 1936 (numbers 10-13) contain some ideas of notable originality and were well received at the time. Similarly the First Piano Concerto, written in 1930, is a fine work, much superior to the Second, written in 1960, which is a lengthy, romantic piece in the style of Rachmaninov. By contrast, the First Concerto is concise and feels much more 'contemporary' and innovative in its melodic and harmonic invention. Like the Fifth Symphony it is a one-movement work, divided into four sections which are to be played without a break. The first section, a bustling Allegro with a toccata-like opening which broadens out into a broad theme for piano, soon gives way to a gentle Adagio, where the piano explores the theme; this is followed by a scherzo-like section at *tempo primo*, leading to a climax, which quietens into a final epilogue, a quiet Adagio which draws to a peaceful conclusion but with a hint of the more disturbed passages from previous sections. In this concerto we can already see some aspects of Alwyn's compositional style which would be used later in the symphonies, in

particular the transformation of themes, and the hints of previous passages of harmonic uncertainty in the otherwise peaceful conclusion.

One of the first pieces written after Alwyn devoted himself to the composition of 'serious music' was the *Concerto Grosso No. 1*, commissioned by the BBC and written in 1943. For this and several other pieces written during the war Alwyn adopted a Neo-classical style, perhaps influenced by Stravinsky's own neo-classical period some years earlier. However by the time he came to write his symphonies he had abandoned this style, and there was also no trace of it in his String Quartet No. 1 (Alwyn did not want to acknowledge the existence of the previous thirteen), an intense romantic work written in 1953. Alwyn wrote two other *Concerti Grossi*, in 1949 and 1964; although there still elements of Neo-classicism, these later concertos display more aspects of Alwyn's mature post-romantic style.

Another important orchestral composition was the *Sinfonietta*, written for string orchestra in 1970. In this piece, which is longer than the Fifth Symphony, Alwyn acknowledges his debt to Berg, and in particular to Berg's opera *Lulu*; a phrase from the opera is the source of much of the material. Although it is not a dodecaphonic piece, it does show some elements of Berg's lyrical but concise style, which would be demonstrated more fully in the Fifth Symphony.

As well as the two piano concertos, Alwyn wrote concertos for violin, viola (the *Pastoral Fantasia* for viola and strings), oboe (*Concerto for oboe, harp and String Orchestra*), harp (*Lyra Angelica*, for harp and String Orchestra), and flute. Of these, the harp concerto, composed in 1953/4, is the finest, being one of Alwyn's most beautiful and lyrical works, though the oboe concerto is also very appealing. He continued to write small orchestral pieces throughout his composing career, and these are too numerous to mention, but one piece which has had considerable acclaim is *Autumn Legend*, written in 1954. This haunting and atmospheric piece, inspired by the Pre-Raphaelite artist Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who was greatly admired by Alwyn,

has been described as ‘the English equivalent to the Swan of Tuonela’⁵¹. Another elegiac piece is the *Tragic Interlude*, which though written in 1936 has as its inspiration the loss of young men in the 1st World War. In lighter vein are the sets of *Scottish Dances* (1946), and *Elizabethan Dances* (1956/7); the latter set contrasts ancient and modern dance rhythms from the courts of Elizabeth I and Elizabeth II.

In most of Alwyn’s orchestral works other than the symphonies, it is his romantic and lyrical style which predominates, though in the *Sinfonietta* there is considerable harmonic instability which presages the 5th symphony. It is in the symphonies, however where Alwyn fully explores his inventive approach to structure and tonality.

7.3 Alwyn's Symphonies in the Context of Twentieth-Century British Symphonists

At the turn of the twentieth century, the two stalwarts of English music, Parry and Stanford, had already written several symphonies, and more followed in the first part of the new century (altogether five by Parry and six by Stanford). However these were not well known compared with some of their other works, in particular the choral pieces, and it would be many years before these fine works were fully appreciated. The situation changed following the success of Elgar’s First Symphony, written in 1908, which achieved instant popularity and became the most frequently played orchestral work of its time. The success of Elgar’s First and to a lesser extent the Second, written in 1911, led to increasing interest in British symphonic thought, though this would not last.

Following Elgar, many British composers kept alive the symphonic tradition during the twentieth century, one of the foremost being Vaughan Williams. By the time Alwyn came to write his First Symphony, Vaughan Williams had already completed his Sixth, and would add a further three in his old age.

⁵¹ Andrew Peter Knowles. Sleeve notes, recording of *Autumn Legend*, Naxos 2008.

Although Alwyn would be familiar with at least some of Vaughan Williams's symphonies from his occupation as flautist in the LSO, he rarely mentions them in his writings – indeed he writes rather disparagingly of Vaughan Williams's 'folksiness'. Stylistically there is very little in common between the two sets of symphonies – although Alwyn's Third has some similarity with Vaughan Williams's Fourth in mood, it is very different in terms of its structure and tonal approach; indeed it is Vaughan Williams's later Sixth Symphony that yields closer structural and intellectual ties with Alwyn's Third with its use of clashing semitones, tritone intervals and the systemisation of these intervals into a tonal scheme that holds all four movements together. As already noted in Chapter 2 the four-note rising phrase which is the main motif in the last movement of Alwyn's First Symphony is also used extensively by Vaughan Williams in the first movement of his Eighth, but this is almost certainly coincidental, since the latter was written some five years after Alwyn's work.

When he does mention other British composers Alwyn tends to be rather critical. His two fellow Northampton born composers, Rubbra and Arnold, both receive rather short shrift. Writing about Rubbra's Sixth Symphony, which had been poorly received in Zurich, Alwyn remarked that 'I don't like the work; it is amateurish and passionless, and quite unsuitable for export to the continent.'⁵² He preferred Rubbra's Fifth, which has 'warmth and less mannerisms', and goes on to describe Rubbra as 'the Hubert Parry of our time - ...compared with Elgar Parry had none of the professional craftsmanship and panache that goes to make a composer of the first rank.' Rubbra's highly polyphonic style in his eleven symphonies has almost nothing in common with Alwyn's much more experimental approach to symphonic structure and tonality.

Arguably some of Malcom Arnold's nine symphonies have more similarities to Alwyn's, with their brassy climaxes and tonal conflicts, but Alwyn makes

⁵² William Alwyn. *Ariel to Miranda*. In: *Composing in Words*, William Alwyn, ed Andrew Palmer, Toccata Press, 2009, p 183.

no reference to them (Arnold's Ninth was composed after Alwyn died, but his first four symphonies were written during the time that Alwyn wrote his first four). Writing about *Tam O'Shanter*, one of Arnold's most popular pieces, Alwyn condemned it as 'a banal, empty piece which conceals lack of inspiration by vulgar tricks and incessant bangings on the gong'⁵³, though he does have kinder words for his Piano Trio - '... refreshingly musical, vital and to the point, and most skilfully written.'⁵⁴.

Two British Symphonists who Alwyn did profess to admire were Walton and Bax. Alwyn was impressed, as were many others, with Walton's First Symphony, particularly the first movement, though even here the praise is less than fulsome – 'the least fidgety of his symphonic works and the best constructed of all'⁵⁵. More generally, 'hearing his music *en masse*, I find his rather hectic rhythms tiring to listen to, and the absence of real repose a genuine drawback'. However Alwyn did recognise Walton's strong individual personality: 'Everything Walton writes is stamped with his own individuality, and this intense and original style has become part of the British composer's vocabulary'. Clearly Alwyn felt he had absorbed some of Walton's style, and specific influences in the first and second symphony have already been referred to in this chapter. In the case of Bax Alwyn wrote a heartfelt tribute which was published in the *Royal Academy of Music Magazine* in 1954⁵⁶. As well as commending Bax's musicianship and craftsmanship, particularly in his piano music, Alwyn clearly found Bax to be a kindred spirit in his romanticism and quest for ideal beauty, and approved of his Celtic influence as being rooted in poetry and literature, which would become increasingly important in Alwyn's later life. Of the symphonies there is little specific mention, other than '...the masterly music contained in his symphonies', and it is doubtful whether there are any specific influences on Alwyn's own

⁵³ Ibid., p 134.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p 203-204

⁵⁵ William Alwyn. *Ariel to Miranda*. In: *Composing in Words*, William Alwyn, ed Andrew Palmer, Toccata Press, 2009, p 124.

⁵⁶ William Alwyn. *The Music of Arnold Bax*. In: *Composing in Words*, William Alwyn, ed Andrew Palmer, Toccata Press, 2009, pp 325-328.

symphonies – as already noted in Chapter 3, the epilogue used by Alwyn to end the Second Symphony was unrelated to the same technique used by Bax in his later symphonies, as Alwyn had not heard these at the time.

The most prolific British symphonist of all was Havergal Brian, who wrote 32 symphonies, the last 22 being written in his eighties and nineties. Brian was an isolated figure, largely self-taught, and did not integrate himself in musical circles. Although Brian shows some similarities with Alwyn in a few respects – the use of different symphonic structures, including one-movement works; a penchant for short, rhythmic motifs; an avoidance of extensive development of his themes – his harmonic language is less inventive than Alwyn's and his writing is more rugged and less lyrical. Brian's symphonies were neglected until relatively recently; Alwyn makes no mention of him and it is unlikely that he would have come across his works. Similarly, Alwyn made no reference to Rawsthorne, E. J. Moeran, Michael Tippett or Robert Simpson, all authors of significant symphonic essays.

However, Alwyn did admire Britten's orchestration and invention in his *Spring Symphony* - 'Though Mahler is the inspiration of his orchestration, Britten has impregnated it with new meaning and forged from a strong influence a characteristic new style'⁵⁷. In his later years at Blythburgh Alwyn became somewhat embittered at his neglect by Britten and the organisers of the Aldeburgh Festival – although he was invited to present some of his song cycles and smaller works, the symphonies and other major works were never performed there. Almost inevitably, given Britten's huge national and international acclaim, he would be dubbed 'the other Suffolk composer'⁵⁸.

⁵⁷ William Alwyn. *Ariel to Miranda*. In: *Composing in Words*, William Alwyn, ed Andrew Palmer, Toccata Press, 2009, p 218.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p219.

7.4 Swimming against the Tide

It seems hard to believe that it is over one hundred years since Schoenberg initiated his revolution in musical thought, with the introduction of serialism and atonality. His first atonal works experimented with a number of different forms of tone-rows before the composer hit upon the more systematic serial twelve-tone organisation technique as a means of bringing order and a coherent harmonic framework into pan-tonal pieces; from 1920 onwards most of his works were composed in this manner. His methods were continued and developed by his pupils Berg and Webern, who formed what is generally recognised as the “Second Viennese School”, and from the 1930s onwards it seemed that this would become the predominant musical style of the 20th century; after Schoenberg’s death it was adopted by Stravinsky, and by several young American composers.

Alwyn was familiar with Schoenberg’s work from quite early in his studies of composition at the Royal Academy, having been introduced to it by his teacher McEwen. However, he eschewed such methods in his own work – he was and remained an essentially diatonic composer, seeking to expand and develop harmonic and tonal language in his symphonies – although he was willing to experiment with different forms, for him the pursuit of beauty remained the paramount objective of his artistic credo. Thus he found himself ‘swimming against the tide’ of musical development. However, in this he was not alone. Those two towering Scandinavian masters of the symphony, Nielsen and Sibelius, continued to be rooted in diatonicism, indeed Nielsen was vehemently critical of the new methods, and in his Fifth Symphony the struggle in the first movement between the life-affirming theme and the destructive side drum is described by him as a conflict between false progressiveness, which he equated with atonality, and the true progressiveness of naturally evolving tonal themes, of which he was an undisputed master⁵⁹.

⁵⁹ Adrian Wright. *The Innumerable Dance*, Boydell Press 2008, pp 196-8.

Almost all the British composers of Alwyn's generation continued to compose in tonal vein, as did Prokofiev and Shostakovich, the outstanding Russian composers of the twentieth century, though the latter two each developed their own very individual approach to tonality. Alwyn considered the Schoenbergian revolution as a fascinating experiment, but ultimately a tangential *cul-de-sac* from which music would eventually return to rejoin the mainstream and continue to evolve from its historic roots⁶⁰. Only time will tell whether Alwyn was right, but in the years since his death there does seem to have been a gradual turning away from serialism and its more experimental sequelae and a revival of interest in romantic and post romantic music generally. However from the 1960s to the 1980s the prevailing cultural trend was towards contemporary, experimental and avant-garde music, particularly at the BBC under its controller William Glock, and Alwyn was only one of many composers who suffered because of this – even Sibelius became unfashionable for a while. In recent years there have been signs of an increasing interest in Alwyn's music, with most of his major works having now been recorded. His centenary year, 2005, saw a number of performances, recordings and broadcasts of his work, sponsored by the William Alwyn Foundation. He did at least achieve some recognition by the BBC, being allocated a slot on "Composer of the Week", but the anniversary was ignored by the Proms, and live performances of the symphonies, indeed of any of his works, remain few and far between. It is hoped that this thesis has demonstrated that Alwyn's five symphonies have been unjustly neglected.

As for the legacy of Alwyn's symphonies, the first four provide a fascinating narrative study of how the symphony as a genre still possessed the potential for experiment and redesign. Alwyn began his symphonic odyssey ostensibly with a more classical, traditional four-movement work, yet even within this framework he began to challenge conventional formal concepts and evinced the ability and imagination to develop new dialectic schemes. In the Second

⁶⁰ William Alwyn. Meet the Composer. In *The Innumerable Dance*, Boydell Press 2008, p240.

Symphony, this penchant for experiment is abundantly evident in the two-dimensional concept of the work as both a one-movement work (in two parts - as Alwyn preferred to see it) and a two-movement, designs which brought their own intellectual challenges; and harnessed to this scheme was a new tonal dialectic of a conflict between two central tonal areas - D minor and F major. The Third Symphony, by comparison, jettisons the notion of a fixed tonality, opting instead for a 'progressive' approach (comparable ostensibly with Sibelius and Nielsen). Such a scheme also forms an intrinsic part of a schemata governed by the organisation of two specific pitch sets, the opposition of the two sets, and their ultimate combination. Perhaps though the greatest interest in Alwyn's handling of structure and tonality in this context is the extent to which he rejects traditional notions of sonata practice and yet, in subtle ways, still makes reference to them (notably in the first movement).

Although by the time Alwyn reached his Fourth Symphony his grand cyclic scheme had effectively evaporated, there are elements of his 'cycle' which reveal a coherence. The Fourth depends much on the practice of the two pitch groups essayed in the Third Symphony, and the three-movement design also owes much to its predecessor, even if it inverts the scheme of tempi. But, as we have seen, Alwyn's freer use of his pitch sets, and the more flamboyant use of keys (engendered by the pitch groups) give rise to a more thematically appealing, Neo-Romantic work redolent of his first two symphonies, and especially the First. Indeed, it is not difficult to hear strong thematic affiliations between the First Symphony and the last movement of the Fourth which perhaps suggests that the composer did not abandon his larger scheme entirely. And, as for the Fifth Symphony, we have seen that, although this work was conceived on markedly different scale from the previous four works, it nevertheless reveals a similar, rigorous discipline in terms of its organisation, and the dialectic argument it reveals owes much to the work and development of the former symphonic essays. As a fitting culmination, it certainly represents the careful and calculated approach Alwyn brought to the symphony as a genre, and to the intellectual challenge to which he was equal.

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